

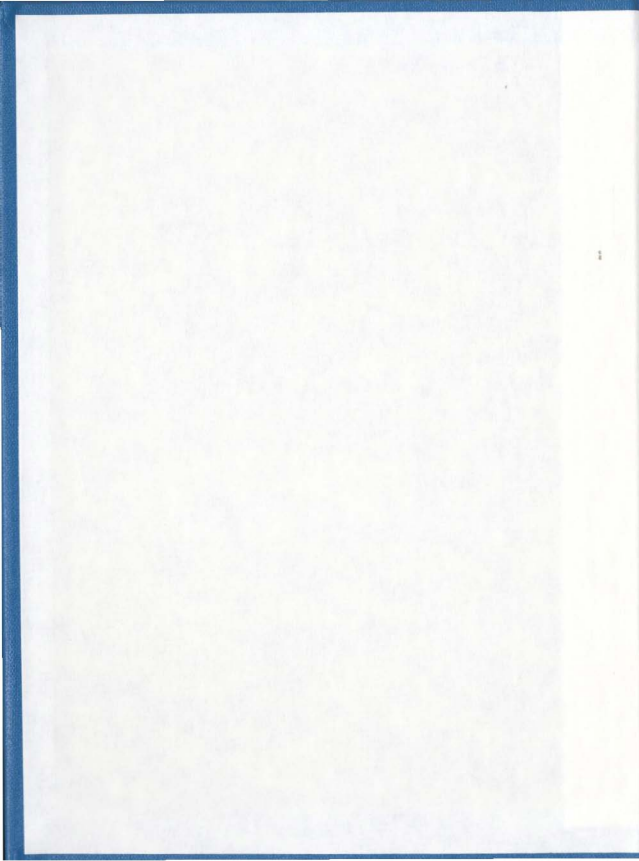
THE KITCHEN TABLE TALKS:  
IMMIGRANT ITALIAN DOMESTIC WORKERS  
IN TORONTO'S POST-WAR YEARS

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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STEPHANIE WEISBART BELLINI









THE KITCHEN TABLE TALKS: IMMIGRANT ITALIAN DOMESTIC  
WORKERS IN TORONTO'S POST-WAR YEARS

By

Stephanie Weisbart Bellini

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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### Abstract

This thesis examines the labour experiences of post-war immigrant Italian women who were employed as household workers in the greater Toronto area. As a sub-text, it also explores the social construction of fictional immigrant Italian women's lives in Italian-Canadian literature.

Dorothy Smith's The Everyday World As Problematic (1987), which addresses how ruling relations work through texts, and that women are generally excluded from ruling relations, provided an analytical context for this thesis. Like Rollins (1985: 8), my approach to this study is based on the notion that those who have lived an experience know more about it than those who have not. In this case, the experiences of Italian immigrant household workers expressed through oral interviews I conducted, are compared with the images of immigrant Italian women as victims of triple oppression commonly found in Social Science and Popular Literature.

Extant popular literature on the situation of Italian females in Canada is flowering, but immigrant women have not received proper analysis because their stereotyped image has not been fully debunked. A qualitative analysis shows that they are portrayed by both female and male writers in a variety of ways, most of which perpetuate stereotypes. First generation Italian immigrant women are characterized in the fiction primarily as wives and mothers, but less often as paid workers. The near invisibility of women workers in the fiction might be related to a difference in intergenerational perceptions. Many literary works of the later

generation of Italian-Canadian writers are more feminist in their orientation, and address a broader range of women's issues.

Italian immigrant household workers were anything but passive victims of job oppression without possibilities of choice, resistance, or independence. By using a variety of strategies for coping within the workplace, women were able to gain a sense of control over their working lives. Italian women worked in the paid and unpaid sectors of the service industry as mothers and wives who performed multiple duties. Many newly-arrived women actively chose paid household employment as a way to market the skills they had developed from child rearing and housekeeping.

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Many greetings and salutations to all my graduate residence dorm mates who befriended me while I was living "on the rock." How fortunate for me that this person from "away" was able to experience the glory that is Newfoundland. Every Canadian should plan a visit to that province at least once in their lives!

I am also extremely grateful to all my friends, relatives and neighbours back in Toronto for all the help and support that facilitated the completion of this project. Bonnie, if not for the fact that you are a computer whiz-kid, I would still be working on completing page one. Hey Salvatore, thanks for taking my mother on all those road trips with my car while I was away.

Special thanks goes out to all my participants for being so generous with their time. I can only hope that I have done your stories some justice. Future generations of Italian-Canadian women would do well to give our foremothers some well-deserved listening time.

Molto grazie mamma. How can I possibly encapsulate all that I want to say to you in one paragraph? You are the one constant in my life and nobody knows or loves me as much as you do. I found this in a poem and I want to dedicate it to you:

Promise me, Ma, promise to come to me in dreams,/ even scolding, to come to me though I have been angry/ with you too often, though I have asked you/ to leave me alone. Come to me in dreams,/ knowing I loved you/ always, even when I hurled my rage in your face.\*

And last, but always first in my memory, . . . to dad who, sadly, never got to see the completion of this project. The very minute your dear, sweet soul departed from this earth you were already gone far too long. With much love and longing, Stefi. xxxooo

- Mazziotti Gillan, Maria. (1997). "Letter to My Mother: Past Due" In Where I Come From. Toronto: Guernica.



## *Chapter 1*

### INTRODUCTION

*To emigrate, / to make another soil one's own, / to change not by choice but out of want, / is to pretend. "Life of Cross" In Black Tongue, by Antonio D'Alfonso.*

#### **1.1 BACKGROUND: A Personal Narrative On The Development Of The Research Process**

In her extensive research on post World War II Italian immigration to Canada, social historian Franca Iacovetta maintains that there is a burgeoning growth of work in women's historical studies that attempts to elevate immigrant women from the back pages of historical obscurity (Iacovetta, 1992). Though still in its infancy, this field continues to be an area of fruitful and much-needed scholarly inquiry. In this context, Iacovetta's 1992 book, Such Hardworking People, seeks to redress "the neglect of women in the literature on immigration that has characterized the study of Italians in particular" (p. xxvii).

Mainstream social studies have defined the Italian immigrant experience solely as a male-dominated activity (Spada, 1969; Razzolini, 1983; Ziegler, 1972 and Abucar, 1991). Men's experiences are taken as the norm and women's experiences are either pushed to the margins or subsumed under men's experiences. For instance, in Ziegler's 1972 survey of Italian households in Metropolitan Toronto, the researcher typifies the Post-World War II Italian immigrant as a "male, aged between 35 and 44, who migrated to Canada between 1951-1961 in order to improve his standard of living" (p.14). The economic contributions of Italian immigrant women, (both paid and unpaid), to the family income are almost invisible or

neglected, as in Spada's 1969 study which classifies the Italian immigrant as a young male who fulfills his dream of home ownership by sheer determination and hard labour (p.130). Who, then, were some of these first-generation Italian women who immigrated to Toronto (and other areas) in Canada's post-war years that got left out of the pages of many scholarly and literary journals? My mother was one such woman. She was sponsored to come to Ottawa as a live-in domestic worker in 1954 by the then Italian Ambassador to Canada in Rome, relocated to Toronto after her work term ended, and met and married my father in 1959 after a three month courtship. My mother continued to do domestic work for many years after my parents were wed. Though I have memories of her coming home physically exhausted after a day's work, I also remember her toughness of character and tenacity in coping with setbacks. In particular, I can vividly recall a shouting match my mother had with her boss on the telephone when I was about 8 or 9 years old that left a lasting impression. Mother's boss expected her to work overtime but our family was hosting some overseas relatives that week and she flatly refused to place her employer's concerns over those of her family. The conversation ended with my mother announcing she was quitting and then promptly slamming the phone down in her employer's ear. Even as a child I internalized on some level that my mother was not the sort of person to allow herself to be victimized.

Iacovetta (1992) believes there remains a tendency among feminist scholars to perceive immigrant women solely as victims without agency and "nowhere is this bias more evident than in contemporary works on postwar immigrant women" (*Such Hardworking People*, p. xxvii). The traditional cliché of the Italian immigrant woman was that of a passive, submissive, and conservative person. Iacovetta, writing on the Italian immigrant woman in

Canada, has dispelled this myth in her research.<sup>1</sup> She maintains that while working within the traditional constraints of Italian culture with its strict gender roles, women could influence, cajole, or generally make life miserable for their husbands thus proving they were a power to be reckoned with within the family unit. They were actively involved in the decision-making process to emigrate and at times, actively demanded it. In this process, as in others, these immigrant women were protagonists in their own lives. Neither in Italy nor in Canada was their universe solely tied to the home and hearth. Immigrant Italian women performed multiple and demanding roles as workers, mothers and wives. Their large participation rates in the Canadian labour force after World War II provided additional opportunities to expand their horizons (Iacovetta, 1992).

This difference between what the research books had written about Italian immigrant women and the perceptions I had about the women of my mother's generation provided a place from which to frame my study and provided the basis for my thesis. Canadian feminist Dorothy Smith (1987) suggests these differences or gaps in information are starting points for feminist research. She defines these gaps as the "lines of fault" or, "the actual or potential disjuncture between experiences and the forms in which experiences are socially expressed" (p.50). I knew from personal experience that many Italian women from my mother's circle of friends had also worked as domestics so I decided to research this group of women. This thesis focuses on the experiences and coping strategies used by Italian immigrant domestics in their daily working lives. Their experiences are recounted through work history interviews. This study also attempts to explore how these women workers have

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<sup>1</sup> See "Trying to Make Ends Meet: A Historical Look at Italian Women, The State and Family Survival Strategies in Post-War Toronto," in *Canadian Women Studies*, 1-28, No.2 (Summer 1987), 6-43 for a more complete discussion.

been socially constructed in popular Italian-Canadian literature and how this literature represents (or misrepresents) their lived realities.

The dearth of primary and secondary sources on Italian women who immigrated to Canada in the latter half of this century underscores the academic importance of such a study and fueled my professional interest. On a purely personal level, as the daughter of a post-war Italian immigrant, I felt it was important to record "herstory" and the stories of other women like my mother. She was orphaned as a young child during World War II, and never got the chance to record her mother's stories before she died, though they were related to me as a little girl upon her knee. Narratives would come to represent a central part of this thesis as the study drew me along. In a cruelly ironic twist of fate, my father died suddenly before the completion of this thesis. Father was a wonderful storyteller: the tales of his childhood depression days were acted out as mini-dramas with the kitchen area substituting as his stage, with Mother and me as his captive audience. With his death, the torch as the next generation's family storyteller was passed along to me by default, and it was a position I felt woefully inadequate to fill. As I have worked on the thesis it has become painfully obvious to me how much a family is tied to their ancestral threads by the stories we tell one another: an entire generation's legacy can vanish without a trace if someone does not take the time to capture and reproduce them.

I was not always so keen about the prospect of studying Italian immigrant women. My research problem developed initially out of an interest in exploring the lives of Filipina domestic workers in the Toronto area (I had read somewhere that these women represent the latest wave of domestic workers immigrating to Canada). I had originally planned to interview a sample group of Filipina live-in domestic workers on temporary employment

visas to determine to what extent foreign-born domestic workers were being exploited by their Canadian employers. I wrote a paper for one of my thesis supervisors outlining my research intent. I explained to her that I had personal experience from working throughout various times in my life in the service sector as a live-in domestic, daycare teacher, babysitter, and summer camp counselor which I hoped I could incorporate into the body of my thesis. I also had some vague notion about using my mother's labour experiences as an immigrant domestic worker to aid me in my data analysis.

I had a meeting with my supervisor in her office to discuss my paper. My supervisor asked me a few personal questions about my family, work history, and my cultural background (my childhood was spent in one of Toronto's many "Little Italy" communities where I learned to speak fluent Italian well before I entered the public school system). She suggested I write my thesis on immigrant Italian women of my mother's generation who had undertaken some form of paid domestic labour in their working lives. My other supervisor suggested I might use my personal interest in Literature in this study as a way to fulfill the interdisciplinary requirements of the Women's Studies program and contrast the portrayal of Italian women in this literature to the lived experiences of my participants. Outwardly, I expressed a desire to conduct this type of research (the idea seemed simple enough) but inwardly, I was ambivalent about the whole process. I have been a peripheral member of the Little Italy I grew up in since 1989. In 1989, I moved away to the east coast to pursue post-secondary studies. While away, I had lost some contact with the ethnic neighbourhood I once enjoyed as a community member (though I still live in an Afro(Somalian)-Italian community in Toronto). The prospect of holding up a mirror to the culture my mother raised me in was a task that left me feeling emotionally uncomfortable : I knew then that the

road to confronting some of my own assumptions and biases about Italian-Canadian culture was going to be a bumpy one. This thesis, in part, attempts to get to the heart of my own misgivings. I see it as a part of an on-going personal growth process.

I drew inspiration for my title from Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman*. In her book, she writes about the differences between her academic life and the life of her mother. She says her mother was a woman who "prepared me for a life reading books instead of a life in the kitchen" (1993: 323). Ironically, Behar ends up back in the kitchen when the Mexican woman she is researching agrees to be interviewed in her home. As the author notes, "And yet, without my knowing it, that life beyond the kitchen led me back to a kitchen, . . . the kitchen in this book" (p.323). Like Behar, I found myself sitting in my mother's kitchen taping her work-related herstory as a domestic. Behar suggests that the kitchen can be revalorized as a site of women's power where "the politics of the public world are discussed, criticized, and, momentarily settled" (p.301). Rather than dismiss the kitchen as a site of women's subordination, it can become an arena of strength where experiences are shared with other women (Behar, 1993).

As soon as I started taking my first research steps, my enthusiasm for the project grew. I chose to limit my sample to a group of first-generation immigrant Italian women who, for a myriad of reasons, decided to come to Canada and settle here permanently. One of the goals of this study was to collect a set of oral interviews that might reflect and illustrate some of the labour experiences and coping strategies of this group. I decided to use this research method because I wanted to uncover the complexities and quality of the Italian women's lives from the point of view of the women themselves. The participant's voice is the crucial element that is often missing from studies of immigrant women. Victimization

and passivity are less visible when immigrant women tell their stories in their own way (Pesman, 1992).

At the same time as I was conducting the interviews, I undertook an extensive analysis of the social construction of immigrant Italian women in Italian Canadian literature. I was not entirely sure that such a literary canon did indeed exist so I was motivated to undertake a search partially by my own ignorance and curiosity. I began by checking the library stacks of Memorial University soon after the meeting with my thesis supervisor. I discovered there was quite a good selection of material available from the university's reference shelves but I found large gaps in the treatment of first-generation Italian Canadian women in this literature; especially notable is the absence of working-class women characters. With the exception of the work of a few authors, discussed later, female domestic workers' activities receive very little attention. What I did find in the fiction were disturbing images of first and second generation Italian-Canadian women characters portrayed as victims of physical abuse, accounts of depression, suicide, and psychological alienation, to name but a few themes. These findings contrasted with my understanding (and memories) of the women of my mother's generation; therefore, part of my analysis starts with the fictional portrayals of Italian immigrant women in post-war Canada and contrasts them with the experiences of the domestic/household workers culled from my interview data.

I asked my mother's permission to interview her first and asked her to refer me to potential participants: friends, neighbours, and acquaintances she knew who had been paid domestic workers. I also asked for a list of potential interviewees from a key contact I knew who was then living in my old neighbourhood as a community worker with immigrant women. My mother approached a long-term friend and employee of our local church

parish, Ms. L., whose help was also crucial. She immediately provided me with the name of the church's domestic worker, and went so far as to act as an intermediary in setting up an interview in one of the rectory offices. At this point, a priest I will refer to as Father G., stepped in with much enthusiasm for my project and lent his unfailing support. Without Father G's offer of assistance, which helped to quell the interviewee's fears of being asked personal questions by a complete stranger, I suspect my participants would not have been so co-operative. Finally, snowball sampling was used to expand my pool of subjects as the study progressed.

I interviewed thirteen women over a space of six months from the summer of 1997 to the end of December 1997. All of the interviews took place in and around Toronto in various Italian communities. Each taping session was unique, lasting anywhere from one to four hours. All of the interviews, with two exceptions, took place at the participants' kitchen tables. Some of the participants were very shy about their ability to speak English well, especially in front of a taperecording device. Several women flatly refused to let me tape them, preferring instead that I write up our conversation by hand. All of the interviewees were bilingual, though they were very modest about their language skills. They need not have been. When an interview (taped or not) was conducted in Italian, the participant was only too willing to repeat her sentence until I understood its full meaning. As my participants were gracious hostesses, wonderful Italian food and drink were always present at these interviews. All of the participants were Italian-born from south-central, Central and Northern Italy, but all had emigrated as young adult women to Canada somewhere between the early 1950s and the early 1970s. All of the women I interviewed were married or widowed, ranging in age from 45 to 76 years old. All had children and some of the



participants were grandmothers. (See map and appendices). I have used pseudonyms to protect the identities of these women. Despite the fact that the interview stage of this study is over, I still in keep in touch with many of the interviewees.

Herein lies one of the most unsettling discoveries I made about myself during the research process. I was amazed at my own ability to comprehend complex ideas presented to me in Italian, yet was equally shocked at my inability to form simple verb tenses. Italian is my mother tongue but I was educated in English. I have not succeeded in mastering either language. I still have trouble spelling in English and I cannot fully converse in Italian either. In her poem, "Growing up Italian" Mazziotti (1997: 54) muses,

When I was a little girl/ I thought everyone was Italian/ and that was good. . . /  
The Italian language smooth/ and sweet in my mouth/ In kindergarten, English  
words fell on me/thick and sharp as hail. I grew silent/the Italian word balanced  
on the edge/ of my tongue and the English word, lost/ during the first  
moment/ of every question.

I too, walk a very shaky line between the two languages.

Despite my nervousness, the interviews went exceptionally well, better than I had anticipated. Every session offered me an opportunity to dialogue with the woman about her life experiences. However, this also revealed another contradiction in the research process. To reduce a woman's life story, her experiences, thoughts, fears, hopes, et cetera, to a two-hour interview seemed an injustice. I had to wrestle with the contradiction created by the time constraints of graduate research and the complexity of the time lines. It produced a guilty conscience. These women allowed me to enter their private homes and open up old wounds during the course of our taping sessions. How could I, in good faith, say thank you very much, have a nice day, and move on to my next participant? I knew I had to approach this study with a professional attitude, but I could not ignore these nagging feelings that

perhaps I was being ruthless in my quest for research data. I concur with Pivato (1994: 34) when he suggests, "In ethnic studies it is difficult to separate the academic pursuit from the personal one."

D'Alfonso (1996: 114) emphatically asks, "Can there ever be an Italian culture without the presence of food?" to which I answer with a resounding NO! Italian social codes of conduct dictated that I engage in what I came to refer to as "little games of play nice." A common scenario would unfold like this: I would ask the *Signora* (the Italian word for Mrs.) I had just finished interviewing if she would give me a tour of her home, knowing full well she would be only too happy to oblige. I had been in enough Italian homes to know how they are laid out architecturally, and I can generalize with confidence when I say that most immigrant Italians are extremely proud people. I would mentally note the style of furniture, the many photos of family and friends hanging on the walls, the absence or presence of family pets, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Each participant's home was utterly spotless. My ultimate aim was to get the *Signora* to take Mother and I out to her garden, if the interview was conducted during the summer months, and, if it took place during the winter months, down to her cold cellar/storage area. Once there I would heap praises upon the *Signora's* ability to grow such a magnificent vegetable garden. Similarly, I would marvel at her skill when it came to curing meats, cheeses, and canning such wonderful preserves. The conversation would then invariably turn to: "Would you like to take some food home with you?" I would feign modesty and reply, oh no, I could not possibly. We would then commence a verbal exchange that lasted several minutes culminating in the *Signora* insisting that I take some

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2. Del Negro (1997: 24) has defined this as "the material culture of women's homes."

food home and I, not wanting to appear rude, would consent. By the time I rolled out of each *Signora's* driveway, the back seat of my car was virtually loaded up with all kinds of goodies. One of my participants even insisted that I take home one of her house plants (and it still flourishes to this day!).

One of the most personally satisfying aspects of this project was working so closely with my mother. I nicknamed her, "my little human dynamo" throughout the research process. My mother was my co-worker, friend, interpreter, facilitator, chef, bank manager, and many other roles too numerous to mention. This study simply could not have happened without her presence. She did the "grunt work" of the research process. She made an endless number of phone calls for me, convinced skeptical participants of the importance of such a study, found 1/3 of my interviewees, and sat with me through all the interviews. My mother's presence encouraged my interviewees to open up a dialogue with her about their experiences resettling in Canada. Perhaps her courteous demeanor and extremely professional attitude enabled me to elicit the responses from my participants I so desperately needed. Her presence required that I affect a self-conscious "daughter" demeanor during these interviews. Italian cultural codes dictate that I defer to my mother's authority as a sign of respect: to do otherwise would have appeared rude in front of my interviewees.

## **1.2 IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND THE CANADIAN LABOUR FORCE**

In Canada, immigration policy has always been geared to meet labour market demands. During the 1950s and 1960s, Canada needed enormous numbers of highly trained professional and technical workers to meet the needs of an expanding economy marked by advanced technology. During the same period, there was also an increasing demand for unskilled and semi-skilled workers in the service, manufacturing and machining sectors.

Because Canada was not training enough of its own people, thousands of both male and female immigrants were brought in to fill these job vacancies (Amopoulos, 1979).

Rapid economic growth in post-war Ontario was fueled and facilitated by a massive influx of European immigrants (Parr, 1995). Between 1946 and 1965, estimates of more than half of Canada's two million immigrants chose to settle in Ontario on a permanent basis (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1988). Women made up 49 percent of this newcomer population. Most entered the country as "family class" immigrants, "sponsored" or assisted relatives, refugees and displaced persons (D. P's). Other women claimants came as contract workers through government assistance to work as domestics. Very few arrived under the "independent" immigrant category (Iacovetta, 1995: 137).<sup>3</sup>

Because immigration practices since the 1950s have tended to encourage the entry of two types of immigrant workers: the highly educated professional and the semi-skilled or unskilled worker, immigrant women tend to be located on the top and bottom rungs of the labour market ladder, either in highly skilled professional jobs or in job ghettos, with little representation in between (Ng, 1988; Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1988). It is beyond the scope of this study to present a profile of the "professional" immigrant worker. Immigrant women who are located in the poorly paid labour market sectors tend to find work in three types of services and industries. Firstly, they are recruited into private domestic/household work. Secondly, immigrant women find employment in the lower strata of the services industries, including restaurants, janitorial and cleaning services, and the food industry. Thirdly, they are found in the lower echelons of the "light"

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<sup>3</sup> The Canadian Employment and Immigration Commission (CEIC) uses the term "immigrant" to refer to persons entering Canada as permanent residents.

manufacturing industry such as textile, garment and plastic factories, and in the retail trade (Ng, 1988).

Work for immigrant women was plentiful in the growing economy of industry-driven post-war Toronto. Employers depended upon a reserve pool of immigrant labourers for certain jobs that native-born Canadians simply would not take. Labour-force participation rates for European immigrant women rose dramatically by 1961 to 40-48 percent (Iacovetta, 1995: 153). In the manufacturing sector where jobs were segregated by sex, immigrant women dominated Toronto's garment and needle trades where they found jobs as sewing machine operators and seamstresses. In laundries, they worked as steampressers, sorters, and clothes folders. In many of the city's processing factories, women immigrants were employed as small machine operators and assembly-line workers. In the service sector, European women worked in various capacities as domestic/household workers, night-time office and building cleaners, chambermaids and dishwashers (Amopoulos, 1979; Estable, 1986; Seward and McDade, 1988; Briskin and Yanz, 1983; Simon and Brettell, 1986).<sup>4</sup> Immigrant women workers were frequently hired by small-scale ethnic businesses (for example, small retail stores, supermarkets and delicatessens) in neighbourhoods frequented by their own compatriots (Ng, 1988).

### **1.3 POST-1945 ITALIAN MIGRATION TO CANADA**

Following the long interruption caused by Canadian and Italian government restrictions, circumstances converged to resume the chain migration flow of numerous Italians to Canada, which had previously been suspended by the Depression and World War II

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4. Like England (1997), I too, use "domestic worker" as an umbrella term but I add that I use this term interchangeably with the word, "household worker" as well.

(Iacovetta, 1987; Zucchi, 1988; Harney, 1988). Italy was economically devastated after the war. Iacovetta (1992: 6) states,

Internal commerce had broken down, export markets were virtually non-existent, and post-war unemployment soared. By 1947, 2.5 million Italians were officially unemployed. Millions more were underemployed, especially peasants and workers in the south's agricultural sector.

To exacerbate conditions, after the war, Southern Italy's birth rate began to increase at a pace faster than the national average. Southern agricultural towns, unable to support this rapidly growing rural population, remained overcrowded and unhealthy (Iacovetta, 1992).

Post-war Italy was still haunted by the memory of political instability and unrest. The history of Italian fascism continued to cast its dark, long shadow, so much so, that the allied governments worried about the Communist party's popularity. The ruling political party, unable to promise its unemployed population economic security, needed to allow its citizens to emigrate (D'Alfonso, 1996; Harney, 1998). As Zucchi (1988: 30) opines, "Italy's Christian Democrats were only too happy to use the 'safety valve' of emigration to stave off social disorder."

The Canadian government, eager to publicly maintain its new "peace keeper" status, had to be seen to be playing a positive role in Western Europe's reconstruction (Iacovetta, 1992). After 1947, the Liberal government entered into a bilateral agreement with Italy to foster and process large-scale immigration to Canada (Sturino, 1985). Under this agreement, native-born Italians could enter Canada in one of two ways: as a family-sponsored immigrant, or as a non-sponsored government "assisted" immigrant under contract for one year to fill a specific labour market demand (but once the contract had been completed, the worker could choose to reside permanently in Canada). Officials referred to such immigration schemes as

"bulk orders" (Iacovetta, 1992; Zucchi, 1988). Essentially, after 1950 it was possible for any healthy Italian individual to emigrate to Canada provided they passed basic political and legal checks (Sturino, 1985).<sup>5</sup>

Between 1948 and 1975, over half a million Italian immigrants entered Canada (Grande and Verrilli, 1995). By 1961, Toronto became the home of the largest Italian population of any Canadian city (Iacovetta, 1992; Harney, 1998). By 1971, over 160,000 (or 40 percent) of all the Italian-Canadians in Canada lived within Metropolitan Toronto (Grande and Verrilli, 1995). Of these emigrants, Southern Italians, especially former peasants, artisans, and merchants, dominated the move to post-war Toronto. Northerners, from the agro-towns and villages of economically depressed northeastern regions of Italy, accounted for 18 percent of the total post-war Italian immigrant population to Canada, while central Italians (like my mother), many from farming and artisanal families, made up only 12 percent of the total Italian immigrant population (Iacovetta, 1992; Harney, 1998).

Toronto's post-war boom witnessed the birth of many new Italian neighbourhoods or "Little Italies." Since newcomers tended to gravitate together to ease the burden of settling into their new lives in Canada, ethnic neighbourhoods were products of responses to the needs of these new immigrants. An Italian community could be an authentic social point of reference or a focal point for political advantage (Zucchi, 1988). During the 1950s, the fastest growing Italian neighbourhood developed along the junctions of St. Clair Avenue West (later to be renamed as "Corso Italia") and Dufferin Street. The "uptown" Little Italy I

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5. Bertell and James Simon (1986: 6) maintain that there is an important contrast between North American (including Canada) and Western European immigration policy in the post-World War II era. Whereas in North America immigration has generally implied permanent residence, in much of Western Europe, post-war migration has been a migration of temporary male and female wage laborers with work contracts of a specific duration.

grew up in soon rivaled the “official” older College Street Little Italy in size by 1961. Over time, many other working-class Italian immigrants would move farther north into the suburbs of Woodbridge, Mississauga, Maple, and North York (as my parents did) establishing self-sustaining communities (Hamey, 1992; Iacovetta, 1992; Zucchi, 1988, and Montesano, 1997)<sup>6</sup>.

#### **1.4 ITALIAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN AND PAID DOMESTIC WORK**

By 1961, over 81,000 Italian immigrant women had entered Canada. Between 25,000 and 30,000 women, many with children, settled in Toronto. Young peasant women, sponsored as dependents by their spouses or families under the family classification scheme, predominated. Only a minority of Italian women entered Canada under nominated terms as trained domestics, hairdressers, and seamstresses sponsored by Canadian employers (Iacovetta, 1992). The number of Italian women workers in Toronto grew to almost 17,000, representing 6.5 percent of Toronto’s 1961 female labour force.

As stated previously, the manufacturing and service sectors were the largest employers of European post-war immigrant women in Canada. By 1961, Italian women represented 28 percent of metropolitan Toronto’s female laundry workers, while 14 percent were employed in personal service work (as cleaning ladies working for private homes or commercial building sites). Only 2 percent of the Italian women working in the service sector took jobs as live-in domestic workers (Iacovetta, 1992).

Canada has had a long-standing tradition of importing European domestic workers since the late nineteenth century. By the late 1870s, industrial expansion drew working-class

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<sup>6</sup> I did my field research before Toronto officially became a mega-city January 1, 1998. Unless otherwise stated, I refer to Toronto as the city and its environs.



Canadian women away from domestic service into better paying and more attractive factory jobs. When the demand for domestic servants began to outweigh supply, the Canadian government developed new immigration schemes in an effort to recruit women from abroad (England and Steill, 1997; Epstein, 1983).

In the winter of 1951, immigration officials and the Department of Labour approved a "bulk order" for 500 Italian domestics but terminated the scheme in April 1952 after only 357 women had arrived. Applicants were to be 18 to 40 years old, single, divorced, or widowed women with no children. Interested workers in Italy were obliged to sign a contract that indentured them as domestics to Canadian employers for a period of one year (Stasiulis and Bakan, 1997; Iacovetta, 1996: 15). The scheme was canceled by Canadian officials because the women recruits complained about their placements, demanded job transfers, and even abandoned their jobs in search of alternative types of employment. Iacovetta maintains, "Officials clearly looked upon [this] group of [Italian women workers] as particularly bothersome" (1996: 17).

Southern Italian women may have been deterred from enlisting in the domestic scheme by Canadian officials. There was an explicit preference for Northern Italian women. Underlying this preference for Northern Italian women workers were racist, sexist, and class biases regarding the "natural" inferiority of Southern Europeans. Northern Italian women were equated with notions of lighter skin tone, taller builds, better educational backgrounds, more work experience, and cultural refinement. Immigrant women from Southern Italy were equated with darker skin, smaller builds, cultural backwardness, and undemocratic (Fascist) traditions (Iacovetta, 1987).

The Canadian labour market is structured in such a way that there are more demands for cheap labour in the marginal sectors of the economy, thus allowing large numbers of Italian women workers the option of regularly moving in and out of the labour force (Ng, 1988; Iacovetta, 1992). While it is important to avoid the tendency to lump all immigrant Italian women workers into two homogenous groups, generally speaking, single Italian women were recruited for live-in service while married Italian women preferred live-out domestic work because it enabled them to live with their families.

Franca Iacovetta (1986, 1987 and 1992) suggests that Italian immigrant women contributed to the welfare of their working-class families struggling to survive in post-war Toronto. The author's research outlines ways in which Italian women's labours (both paid and unpaid), remained critical to the daily survival of their newly arrived families. Confronting new rhythms of work and life in post-war Canada, at home, women performed crucial economic roles by stretching limited resources, earning extra cash (by baby sitting and doing piece sewing), and cutting costs (for example, by growing their own fruits and vegetables, preserving meats, and curing homemade cheeses). Like other working-class women, their daily efforts replenished the male bread-winner and fed, clothed and raised children (Iacovetta, 1986, 1987 and 1992). Many married, immigrant Italian women with school-age children worked as office cleaners and domestics when they first arrived in Canada. These women often took this type of work because the flexible hours permitted them to organize their work day around other family members' jobs, or their children's school hours. As many newly arrived immigrant Italian women lacked adequate English language skills, they also worked in this sector because English is not usually a requirement for most cleaning jobs and domestic work. Jobs in the service sector also provided Italian

immigrant women with one way to market the skills they may have developed from child rearing and housekeeping, and these jobs usually did not require further training (Estable, 1986).

Several authors (Ramirez, 1989; Sturino, 1978; and Jansen, 1988) have suggested that because immigrant Italian women worked in the low-paying sectors of the economy (in clothing, food processing, light manufacturing as well as in the service trades), the income derived from these jobs could never seriously usurp the male wage earner's role as the primary breadwinner of the family. Since the immigrant wife's primary sphere of influence was the hearth and her children, women who worked at home for wages taking in boarders or contracted piece-work sewing, did so mainly to make a monetary contribution to the family's financial well being. Though these studies suggest that the immigrant wife's earnings did make a significant contribution to the family's welfare, especially during the times when her husband faced irregular or seasonal unemployment, her wages were seen as "a mere extension of her role as the family's shopper . . . it was rarely referred to as a necessity" (Sturino, 1978: 298). This analysis is problematic. These researchers are immigration specialists and their data is based on statistical references. Because these studies do not take into account actual experiences of first-generation Italian women workers, their voices get lost in "the impersonalized details of statistical information" (Cohen, 2000: 159); moreover, this rigid definition completely obliterates the possibility that the blurring of both social roles as wage-earner and housewife might have occurred (Harney, 1998).

Iacovetta's research details how Italian working-class women derived tremendous self-satisfaction and pride from the labours (both paid and unpaid) they performed for the benefit of their families. Although an Italian immigrant woman's motives for engaging in

waged domestic labour outside the home might include her need to contribute to the financial stability of her family, “some women’s options were directly limited by husbands who determined when and where their wives could work” (1987: 6). This reflected Southern Italian sexual mores which dictate that women not work unchaperoned in the company of men, but this should not discount the fact that working outside the home can be an empowering experience. Iacovetta does not ignore the hardships these New Canadian women endured adjusting to their new-found lives in Toronto, but her work maps out the positive contributions they made as workers, wives and mothers.

### **1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

The objectives of this study are:

- to examine the social construction of immigrant Italian women’s lives in Italian-Canadian literature. Are there representations of Italian immigrant domestic workers in Italian-Canadian literature? How are these women portrayed?
- to examine how post-war immigrant Italian domestic workers make sense out of their working lives. What means did they have to achieve a sense of personal satisfaction in their working lives? Did immigrant Italian women and their families see domestic work as demeaning? Was doing domestic work simply seen as a necessity for economic survival or something more than that?
- to compare and contrast the actual experiences of immigrant Italian women (domestic workers) with fictional portrayals of immigrant Italian women (workers) in Italian-Canadian literature. Does Italian-Canadian literature accurately represent the lives and experiences of these immigrant Italian women (workers)? Are there different stories being told by the participants in this study? How are they different?

### **1.6 FEMINIST AND INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH**

This study is feminist and interdisciplinary in that it draws on insights from sociology, history, literature, anthropology and feminist theory. Reinharz (1992: 6) suggests that, “Feminist research methods are methods used in research projects by people who identify

themselves as feminist or as part of the women's movement." Tirabassi (1992) suggests that the interdisciplinary approach that characterizes Women's Studies is relevant to the study of "ethnic" or immigrant women. Furthermore, she argues that a uni-dimensional approach cannot produce a holistic image of immigrant women that understands the roles they played within their ethnic group and the larger society (Tirabassi, 1992: 136).

Despite the burgeoning growth of feminist academic research, very little literature exists that examines the situation of immigrant Italian females in Canada. Notwithstanding the excellent social/historical work of Iacovetta (who is a leading authority on post-war Italian immigrant women's history to Canada) and a few other sociologists and historians working within the Italian community (Sturino and Perin, 1992, Harney, 1993, Ramirez, 1989, Zucchi, 1988, Potestio and Pucci, 1988), works on Italian immigrant women appear in separate anthologies and are generally not well integrated into mainstream Canadian women's histories. At a time when there is very little periodical literature about Italian women in post-war Canada, it is not surprising to find that immigrant women's specific situation has seldom been examined seriously in studies of the Canadian immigrant labour force (Estable, 1986; Jansen, 1988).

Pesman (1992) says that there are historiographical gaps, particularly of a qualitative nature, in writings on Italian immigrant women. The male bias in immigrant studies has excluded the experiences of women from academic discourse (Del Negro, 1997). Patai (1988: 1) declares, "Until recently the prism of androcentrism has distorted most of our knowledge about women, and the lives of ordinary women, . . . have been seen as unimportant, even trivial." Iacovetta (1997) and Scarpaci (1978) suggest that studies in Canada and the US tend to dismiss the importance of the private sphere which is associated

with women's activities, preferring instead to emphasize activities that correspond with the public realm and "traditional" male roles (wage-earning patterns, workplace employment, and labour activism). Areas of study such as childbearing and rearing, housework and other forms of productive work that are specific to Italian women, (and I would add, specific to most women) are largely ignored or neglected. This absence can partially be attributed to the fact that female behaviour is thought to have little direct impact on immigrant community life as defined by "public activities, organizations, and institutional-building" (Iacovetta, 1997: 16). Feminism, by definition, gives women the right to claim (or reclaim) their "voice."

Smith (1989: 451) maintains that despite the fact that the literature on domestic service dates back to at least the eighteenth century, only within the past twenty years has scholarly literature on domestic service received any serious attention. One of the most prominent features of the study of domestic service is its fragmentation: it has not been a field of study characterized by a cohesive group of academic scholars who know each other's work well. Furthermore, individual researchers are primarily involved with the study of domestic service in only one geographic location:

This multidisciplinary nature of the interest in domestic service is positive in the sense that research enriched by the application of different methodological approaches and different disciplinary traditions can result in a more comprehensive view of the topic as a whole. However, it does not necessarily result in increased interchange among the researchers from the different disciplines (Smith, 1989: 451).

While Colen and Sanjek (1990: 10) maintain "there is no broad, comprehensive, world systematic theory that accounts for the emergence of household work everywhere", nevertheless, they stress that a global perspective that compares different studies of domestic workers opens up opportunities for more widespread debate. Smith (1989: 454) goes further

to add that the importance of a single journal that is devoted to publishing extensive comparative analyses on the study of domestic service cannot be over-estimated. To date, there is no one study on Italian immigrant women workers that investigates these women's experiences within an understanding of domestic work.

Long hours, hard work, low wages and lack of privacy coupled with the low status of domestic work, all add to the characteristic unpopularity of the job. But what about the pride Italian immigrant domestic workers took in their initiative and in their ability to work hard and do a job well? Feminist researchers who choose to study the lives of immigrant women workers need to show examples of domestic workers who subverted and overcame the various forms of oppression they encountered in their working lives. As American ethnic historian Vincenza Scarpaci (1978) claims, many feminist analyses of Italian immigrant women in North America fail to understand the complexities of Italian culture and the working class position of immigrant women in the new world. She writes that one thing that is wrong with much of the current literature on Italian-North American women is that it tries to define Italian women workers solely in terms of their biological relationships to the family. She further maintains that these "wife/mother, daughter/sister, and spinster/aunt" roles defined by blood relationships are too rigid:

Some women work for wages, some women participate in community organizations, and some women acquire high levels of skills and education. The behaviour of females undertaking these activities may or may not be influenced by their family identification (p.22).

Scarpaci (1978) maintains that a feminist analysis that is sensitive to class and ethnicity can reveal important aspects of immigrant women's working experiences hitherto neglected by women historians.

## 1.7 SUMMARY AND OUTLINE OF THESIS

In this chapter, I have provided a brief socio-historical overview of the push/pull forces which compelled many post-war Italians to migrate to Canada. I have also introduced the thesis topic, and shown how I decided to carry out the research.

In Chapter Two, I review the existing social scientific literature on domestic work. I also give a brief review of Italian-Canadian literature and introduce the analysis of a number of critics of this fiction. I outline my analytical framework and methodology, and explain that it is both feminist and interdisciplinary. The analytical framework draws on the work of Canadian feminist Dorothy Smith's The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology (1987). The methodology for this thesis is influenced by the research of pioneering sociologists Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser as discussed in Sherman and Webb's 1988 publication, Qualitative Research in Education: Focus and Methods.

Chapter Three presents a qualitative content analysis of the construction of immigrant Italian women in Italian-Canadian literature. The qualitative content analysis explores fictional representations of immigrant Italian women found in various literary sources. Literary criticism of Italian-Canadian writing draws on a broad spectrum of formal strategies and themes.

In Chapter Four, I summarize the findings of the in-depth interviews. The methodology for the qualitative content analysis in chapter four derives in part from Gregson and Lowe (1994) and Moss (1997). Several scholarly studies have guided the design of Chapter Four (Thornton-Dill, 1988; Romero, 1992; Glenn, 1986; Cock, 1980 and 1989; Rollins, 1985 et al). This chapter is devoted to the thirteen participants who were part of this study. Their work problems and coping mechanisms, related to work, family, language and resettlement



difficulties are explored. Their experiences challenge the dominant ideology that Italian immigrant women were passive and powerless agents in their own destiny.

Chapter Five concludes with a comparison between my participants' experiences found in Chapter Four and the experiences of fictional post-war Italian immigrant women found in Chapter Three, in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of these women's lives. A summary of my personal observations concludes the thesis.

## Chapter 2

### DOMESTIC WORKERS AS VICTIMS AND AGENTS

*What was it that had consumed my mother to the point of near death? Sheer physical exhaustion from cleaning people's houses? That was what she used to do then. She was a 'cleaning lady.'* Marisa De Franceschi in Surface Tension.

*Mamma was by no means the Mamma mia of the television ads—jolly, naïve, and round. She defied all stereotypes.* Penny Petrone in Breaking the Mold.

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Feminist sociologists use women's experiences and descriptions of their lives to refute the dominant ideologies about women and their place in the world (Smith, 1987). It is Dorothy Smith's contention that ruling relations work through texts and that women are generally excluded from ruling relations. One way to access the ideological nature of such texts is by looking for the "lines of fault" (Smith, 1987: 50) that emerge as such texts are contrasted with the actual experiences of marginalized groups. Thus researchers should take, as a point of departure, the actual daily lives of women and move from there to scrutinize official texts for dominant ideologies that shape the everyday lives of women. Italian immigrant workers are one such marginalized group. This chapter explores the existing social scientific literature on the lives of domestic workers and draws from it some elements of the conceptual framework for this thesis. I focus most of my attention on American and Canadian studies of domestic workers conducted within the last 25 years. The scholarship on working-class Italian immigrant women and Italian domestic workers is included in this discussion. The second part of the chapter reviews the work of a number of literary critics concerned with Italian-Canadian fiction to identify the central themes found in this literature that are relevant to the social construction of Italian immigrant women in this fiction. It pulls together the

central themes in these texts, identifying their relevance for this study. The chapter identifies gaps in both literatures. It also points to how this thesis can add to knowledge about immigrant Italian domestic workers and Italian-Canadian fiction by using women's experiences to highlight the gaps and ideological constructions in this fiction. The concluding section of the chapter outlines the conceptual framework used in this thesis while describing the methodology used for the textual analysis of Italian fiction and for the interviews with Italian immigrant domestic workers outlined in Chapters Three and Four.

## **2.2 SCHOLARLY LITERATURE ON DOMESTIC WORKERS**

The social science literature on domestic workers can be divided into two broad categories. First, a substantial amount of writing focuses, almost exclusively, on the social constraints and sources of oppression that curb choice and create real barriers to self-determination for domestic workers (Ng, 1988; Das Gupta, 1996; and Silvera, 1983 et al). This literature discusses the variations between different groups of domestic workers (for example, between immigrant and non-immigrant women, white and non-white women, working-class or middle class women). From the perspective of this literature, Italian immigrant domestic workers are oppressed by four interconnecting systems of domination based on gender, class, race/ethnicity and citizenship. The methodologies used in the social scientific literature discussed in this first section include case-studies, interview-based research, and consultation of government documents and census data.

A second body of literature, while recognizing structural and cultural barriers, emphasizes domestic workers' sense of agency, resiliency, coping strategies and acts of resistance in the face of exploitative social and economic situations (Iacovetta, 1986; Glenn, 1986; Cock, 1980 and 1989; Romero, 1992; Rollins, 1985; Thornton-Dill, 1988 et al.). These studies move

beyond the "immigrant-as-victim" stereotype to demonstrate that disadvantaged and subordinated groups of domestic workers can also exercise resistance and choice, even if these are limited in some respects (Iacovetta, 1997). One of the ways the domestic workers' motives, strategies, and lived experiences are documented in this second body of literature is by using oral history as a data-collecting methodology. Oral history is a crucial research device used to record living subjects who have been traditionally marginalized and silenced (Reinharz, 1992).

### Domestic Workers as Victims

The literature discussed in this section refers to non North-European, domestic workers as victims of "triple oppression" (Ng, 1982, Cumsille et al, 1983, Das Gupta, 1996). Race scholars such as Roxana Ng (1988), Tania Das Gupta (1996), and Makeda Silvera (1983), have used case studies as a methodological choice to uncover the ways in which immigrant working-class women encounter discrimination and exploitation related to gender, class and race/ethnicity on the job site. These sources of oppression have intersected to place immigrant domestic workers, particularly non-white women, in a subordinate position relative to men and other women.

According to Roberts:

Ethnicity and femininity [are] two socially constructed systems of behaviour produced by relations of domination...Ethnicity and femininity refer to the social consequences of being female or born into whatever ethnocultural group. [They] function as a system of membership that is used to produce explanations for our place in the social order. In Canada the ethnicity and femininity systems are linked to the class system, which distributes inequality along what used to be called race and sex lines (1990: 5).

In exploring the relationship between gender, race, and class oppression, this literature explores how the barriers immigrant domestic workers have faced are caused by "social,

political and especially economic processes at the world-system level, over which they had absolutely no control" (Roberts, 1990: 9). Relations of domination related to gender and class are used to explain how domestic workers form a reserve pool of cheap female labour. Within these systems of behaviour, all domestic work and child care work are socially constructed as something women are "naturally" suited to do. Responsible for domestic work at home, many working-class women lack what Canadian employers define as appropriate skills, a formal education, and paid workplace experience, yet they are in need of paid work. In addition, working married or single women with children are also burdened with child rearing responsibilities and unpaid household work. Without access to the services of quality daycare or baby sitters, these women find domestic work is one of a few viable options available to them that allows them to work around their family's timetables. These constraints force many working-class women to take jobs in domestic service, cleaning, and other positions in the lower echelons of the labour force that are poorly paid but readily available. They also keep domestic workers from "moving up" into the higher paying service sector jobs.

The literature recognizes that domestic workers do not make up one monolithic group. The experiences of foreign domestic workers are different than those of Canadian-born women. Racialised stereotypes exist regarding the suitability of certain foreign nationals for domestic work (England and Steill, 1997: 207). Arat-Koc opines:

It is widely known that a hierarchy exists among domestic workers in Canada. Those from Western Europe are generally employed as 'nannies', expected to be involved only in child-care. They are likely to get higher pay, better treatment, and recognition for their work. However, foreign domestics from the Third World are expected to do both child-care and housework and receive less pay and recognition for their contribution (1992: 239).

All “foreign” women workers “occupied a position that was many times disadvantaged” (Roberts, 1990: 9) to varying degrees depending on their race, class and cultural origins.

Many scholars (Boyd, 1986; Daenzer, 1993; Brettell and Simon, 1976, 1986; Giles and Januario, 1987; Arat-Koc, 1986; Henry, 1968; England and Steill, 1997), have explored the historical development and contemporary underpinnings of Canadian legislative policies related to bringing in and regulating immigrant and migrant domestics (Bakan and Stasiulis, 1997). Women domestics have generally been imported into Canada under the auspices of government recruitment schemes to fill positions that native-born Canadians cannot or will not take. Numerous and well-kept documents of government and company-sponsored schemes have enabled Marxist, labour, and women’s historians in Canada to examine biases inherent in nineteenth and twentieth century immigration policies and their implementation (Iacovetta, 1997). During the nineteenth century, Canada recruited white, Anglo-Saxon, “nation-building stock” for domestic work. However, in the first half of the twentieth century, when demand for women workers exceeded supply, Canada began actively recruiting overseas for live-in “foreign” help. Stasiulis and Bakan maintain, “A racial/ethnic hierarchy in immigration policy emerged that judged potential migrants according to their distance from, or proximity to, ‘white British’ ideals” (1997: 32). During the pre-war and war years, “foreign” domestics were recruited from continental Europe (including displaced persons from the camps recruited after 1945). European domestics were given landed immigrant status upon their arrival and were free to pursue full citizenship status after they fulfilled their one-year contracts. When the supply of European domestics dwindled, Canada began to recruit women of colour from the Third World as live-in domestics in the mid-1950s (Stasiulis and Bakan, 1997).

Women of colour recruited for domestic work from Third World countries were subjected to racist government attitudes about their "supposed" natural inferiority. Although this group of women was granted landed immigrant status upon their arrival in the mid-1950s, the Canadian government was given the right to deport them if their employers found them unsuitable for domestic work. Bakan and Stasiulis state, "Early domestic employment agreements. . . omitted references [to deportation]" which suggests that Black and Third World women workers were subjected to tougher scrutiny by employers and immigration officials than white women recruited from previous domestic schemes (1997: 36).

In 1973, the citizenship rights of Third World live-in domestics were stripped away. The Canadian government introduced a scheme that granted them temporary work visas only. This action placed greater restrictions on the rights of Third World women of colour who are currently the greatest source of foreign recruited domestic workers in Canada. According to Bakan and Stasiulis:

This reversal in the accessibility of female domestics to permanent residence in Canada coincided with the relative increase in the number of domestics recruited from Third World sources, who were also women of colour. While many European domestics continued to enter Canada as landed immigrants, [Black] domestics increasingly entered on temporary employment visas. Because of the popular purchase of racist and sexist assumptions of who is and who is not legitimately a Canadian. . . what is unacceptable for most was rendered acceptable for designated 'others', notably, non-citizen women of colour (1997: 34-36).

Under the current immigration scheme, foreign domestic workers must remain in live-in service for a period of time before being allowed to apply for landed immigrant status. Women workers with full citizenship rights can opt for a live-in or live-out position without fearing the threat of deportation. The importance of live-out work for domestic workers cannot be underestimated because it gives the domestic worker greater autonomy and

personal freedom. Naturalized women workers also have the option of moving out of paid domestic work into other service and non-service occupations. Workers on temporary visas are recruited for one type of occupation only, and therefore cannot exercise other employment options. Because of the highly personal nature of live-in domestic service, some (but not all) workers are vulnerable to potentially abusive and exploitative circumstances. Many women workers of colour from Third World countries come from poor backgrounds. In many instances, the wages they earn in Canada are sent back home to support families they left behind. Economic need, coupled with the fact that they are denied full citizenship rights, suggests that women of colour and Third World women are the most disadvantaged group of live-in domestic workers (Bakan and Stasiulis, 1997).

Arat-Koc (cited in Bakan and Stasiulis, 1997) states, "While all foreign domestics have experienced varying degrees of coercion by the state and more powerful groups, European domestics have fallen along different points in the continuum of the treatment of immigrant domestic workers in Canada" (p.73). Italian women recruits were considered less desirable than British, English-speaking women for domestic service, but racist notions equating dark complexions with inferiority meant that Italian domestics stood somewhere in the middle of this continuum because while they had lighter skin tones than Black domestics, many had darker skins than did immigrants from northern Europe (Arat-Koc, 1997). Italian women workers may have had an advantage over women of colour and Third World women because they had lighter skin, but these women workers were also affected by language difficulties and a general unfamiliarity with Canadian culture (Iacovetta, 1986: 17).

Toronto social worker Carmen Perillo's 1987 article, "Multicultural Policy: Women Beware" touches on the material conditions of Italian immigrant women's lives in Toronto



during the early 1950s. The author explains that Southern Italian women, who worked for wages outside the home upon their arrival in Canada, perhaps did so for the first time in their lives. Forced to work long hours by employers who economically exploited them, the women often came home late only to face the added burden of housework and child care responsibilities. Perillo opines that there were other factors that added to the plight of Italo-Canadian women during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s which made their lives particularly stressful. She maintains the Catholic church supported the oppression of women within the community by preaching to them that their primary role was that of family caregiver and nurturer. Women's labours (both paid and unpaid) were supposed to serve the needs of their families first, while their personal needs were to take second place. Perillo asserts that value should be placed on the work (both paid and unpaid) immigrant Italian women did, and that recognition for the roles they performed in and out of the home is long overdue.

Estable (1986) posits the idea that ascribed roles, that is, role definitions rooted in social attitudes which limit the type of work that immigrant women were expected to perform, may be significant in women "choosing" to do domestic or service work. She asserts that most Canadian employers would consider it acceptable to hire a heavily-accented Southern European "cleaning lady" but would find it strange to have a Canadian (i.e. white and native-born) office cleaner or "cleaning lady" working for them. This bias expresses racist and classist assumptions about who should be doing paid domestic labour for a living.

Constanza Allevato's (1987) article, "The Status of Italian Immigrant Women in Canada" does not specifically address the working conditions of domestic service, but it does stipulate that many immigrant Italian women endured work-related injustices for twenty-five to thirty years and more while living in Canada. In 1980, Italian women earned an annual average

income of \$8,600 (second lowest in earnings next to West Indian women workers) compared to the then national average of \$15,751. Working-class Italian women, beset by language difficulties and lack of formal education, were forced into taking low-paying, dead-end jobs as cleaners, assembly-line workers and sewing machine operators. As most of these women workers were non-unionized, this also contributes to their low wages and poor working conditions. Many Italian immigrant women, now forty-five to fifty years of age, continue to work in these types of jobs.

Iacovetta (1986: 266) maintains that social scientists who do scholarly work on immigrant women (Arnopoulos, 1979; Johnson, 1982; Ng and DasGupta, 1981; Roberts, 1988; Cumsille et al, 1983) tend to portray them primarily as victims of triple oppression—as unskilled workers they are exploited by the Canadian labour market, as non-English speaking minority subjects they are oppressed as immigrants by the receiving society, and as women, they are perceived to be the victims of both Canadian and the patriarchal culture from which they originated. This approach is problematic because it suggests that immigrant women have little sense of personal agency and it fails to consider whether the women themselves looked at their own lives as wholly bleak. That is, it does not explain what strategies and maneuvers they might have engaged in as workers, to gain control over their own lives and to achieve their own goals (Iacovetta, 1997: 20).

Brettell and Simon (1986) imply that the structural constraints of the world's political and local economies provide a context within which certain experiences are shared by most immigrant women; however, as Pesman (1992:158) so clearly states:

The stereotype of immigrant woman as the most oppressed and powerless sector in society is facile, condescending, and destructive, because the descriptive so easily becomes the prescriptive and the women themselves are deprived of models to effect change.

A structuralist analysis that focuses exclusively on the social, institutional, and cultural determinants of women's oppression is problematic because it obscures how the women themselves gave meaning to their work and their lives in the context of these restraints (Iacovetta, 1992).

### Domestic Workers as Agents

A second body of social scientific work comprises both North American and international research. Feminist researchers like Iacovetta (1986), Lindstrom-Best (1986), Srinivas (1995), Thornton-Dill (1988), Barber (1991), Romero (1992), Rollins (1985), Cock (1980 and 1989), Moss (1997), and England and Stiell (1997) detail how domestic workers have coped physically and psychologically in their workplaces. The coping strategies described include resisting and retaliating against unfair bosses, forming networks with other domestic workers, creating spaces of respite, deliberately slowing down on the job, and more. Most of these studies used in-depth and multiple interviews with domestic workers. By consciously choosing to focus on women's words, the research allowed the domestics to share the lessons of their work-place experiences. All of these studies try to dispel the myth that women who work as domestics are somehow docile; they suggest that household workers were anything but passive victims of oppression without possibilities of choice, resistance, or independence. Their focus makes immigrant women protagonists in their own lives.

While exploitation, hardship, and suffering are not ignored in this literature, these researchers have also examined domestic workers' active and less traditional forms of resistance to patriarchy, and race and class oppression. These scholars have used their interviewees' work-related stories and self-presentations as a method by which they could gain knowledge about the structure and nature of domestic work; its relationship to the family; the role of race, ethnicity, culture, and immigration in domestic work; and the dynamics of the mistress-servant relationship (Thomton-Dill, 1994). These studies helped me to recognize that ordinary, everyday acts of resistance have the potential to transform what is commonly regarded as a gender specific, dead-end, low-paying and degrading job into work that is personally meaningful, challenging and rewarding.

Several scholars (MacBride Boyd, 1996; Lensky, 1981; Sangster, 1995; Barber, 1991) have highlighted the experiences of early twentieth century immigrant domestics by drawing upon archival and primary sources (such as letters, diaries, and first-person testimonials) as data (Iacovetta, 1997). Marilyn Barber is one of Canada's foremost scholars on nineteenth century immigrant domestics (Iacovetta, 1997). Her work (1991) chronicles the migration patterns of famine-era Irish domestic servants to North America. Barber shows that Irish women immigrants willingly entered domestic service in America and Canada because, in comparison to staggering rates of unemployment in Ireland, it represented upward mobility and a chance to earn desperately needed funds. By 1845, single women formed almost half of the total number of Irish immigrants going to the United States and Canada. After the Great Famine, they were frequently in the majority. There were few opportunities for paid employment for women in Ireland at this time. Single Irish women were more certain than their male compatriots of securing employment in North America because the demand for

domestic servants has historically almost always exceeded supply. A daughter's remittances from her wages would pay for the passage of other members of the family to immigrate to North America or aid the family back in Ireland.

Varpu Lindstrom-Best, (1986) studying the interwar period, argues that immigrant Finnish domestic workers in Canada took pride in being maids, and that within the Finnish community, where domestic work constituted the majority of available paid labour for single Finnish women, the work was not held in poor regard. In fact, the economic independence of the women workers, who could emulate the lifestyles of their middle-to upper-class Canadian mistresses, became a source of respect. Lindstrom-Best also suggests that there were some positive aspects to domestic work. As a live-in maid, the newly arrived single immigrant woman did not have to worry about where she was going to live: domestics usually lived in middle-and upper-class homes in safe and relatively clean neighborhoods. Even if their rooms were located in cramped servant's quarters, at least they had a solid roof over their heads and a safe home where their employer might become a surrogate family member who could watch out for the safety of their employee (p.37).

Iacovetta's (1996) article, "Primitive Villagers and Uneducated Girls: Canada Recruits Domestics From Italy, 1951-52\*" opened up a highly neglected area of Italian women's history (Sarlo-Hayes, 1997). This was the one piece of historical research I could find on Italian immigrant women recruited for live-in domestic service in Canada. Italian domestics who were recruited as workers under the auspices of the domestic scheme of 1951-52 were expected to enter the labour force and thereby directly contribute to the post-war Canadian economy. Iacovetta (1986) argues that Italian immigrant workers, far from being passive or ignorant, had their own personal reasons for immigrating to Canada. Italian domestics were

actually links in the complex chain of family and kinship migration that characterized post-war immigration to Canada. Like their Irish counterparts, Italian domestics sent home portions of their paychecks in the hope of eventually sponsoring parents or siblings back in Italy to come to Canada. In this context, Italian women, like their Irish counterparts, were often central to their family's economic success (Iacovetta, 1986). A New-Canadian (Italian immigrant) woman's access to and control of economic resources can be viewed as status-enhancing and the basis for change in the distribution of power within the family, even if only temporarily (Brettell and James Simon, 1986).

Folklorist Giovanna Del Negro's Looking Through My Mother's Eyes: Life Stories of Nine Italian Immigrant Women in Canada (1997), examines the often ignored and undervalued topic of "women's talk." Her study focuses on the life experiences of nine Italian women ranging in age from forty-three to eighty-five, who immigrated to Montreal, Quebec during the latter part of the 1950s or 1960s. All of her interviewees were working-class women who made their living as professional sewers in the predominantly gender-segregated garment industry of Montreal; only one member of the author's study had any experience working as a live-in maid in Switzerland and in parts of Italy before switching occupations.

Del Negro's premise is that subordinate groups, like immigrant women, "develop creative survival strategies for coping with repressive social conditions" (p.13) both at home and at work. The researcher discovered that, while on the job, her interviewees engaged in behaviour that is culturally defined as taboo (such as swearing, obscene bantering and ritual insults) among themselves while working at the cloth cutting and finishing tables. By using these tactics to offset the persistent demands of overbearing bosses, speed-ups, low wages,

and noisy and chaotic working environments, the women "stretched the boundaries of their culture, [and found] ways of criticizing the status quo without openly calling into question the fundamental values of their society" (p.12). Though Del Negro stipulates that life story is a blending of both "fact and fiction" (p.20), the expressive phraseology in her participant's narratives exposed subversive messages of protest which were used as a coping mechanism to redress the power inequalities between female workers and male bosses.

Most Canadian research on immigrant domestic workers has focused on Toronto (England and Stiehl, 1997). Epstein's (1983) article, "Domestic Workers: The Experience in B.C." is one of the few I have found that focuses on the experiences of West Indian live-in domestics in western Canada. This is an article based on data culled from interviews she conducted in the early 1980s in British Columbia. Epstein's data revealed her interviewees were working under similar exploitative conditions, but the researcher also describes the attempts these women workers made to "take control of their lives and to demand the right to decent working and living conditions" (p.223).

Das Gupta (1996), Gannage (1986 and 1990), and Johnson & Johnson's (1982) in-depth personal interviews with immigrant working-class women in Toronto's garment district in the early to mid-1980s expose the hidden race, class and (sometimes) sexual exploitation present on many piece-work shoproom floors. Although the on-site labour conditions depicted in these books were usually unfavourable, the authors suggest the reason women of their studies did not conform to stereotypical notions of immigrant women was that their interviewees all shared pro-union views, which the authors recognize have the potential to raise workers' consciousness.

Moss (1997) conducted multiple in-depth conversations (between Fall 1990 and Spring 1991) with fourteen women employed as housekeepers in southern Ontario. She discovered the domestics used three sets of strategies to assist them in coping with their daily working lives. The first set consisted of small-scale acts of “breaking the rules” (p.186). For example, her participants indicated that they did things like listening to the radio or watching television in their clients’ homes while they were working. By taking short-cuts and cleaning at their own pace, “the most popular way to break rules and challenge authority” (p.186), the worker created a comfortable atmosphere or “space of resistance” which insulated her from her employer’s control. The second set of strategies the workers used was to ask their employers for wage increases. By demanding to be paid a decent wage that reflected the increased cost of living, Moss believes the women were able to transform the waged labour relation. The third set of strategies revealed that the domestics carved out a place for themselves in their employer’s homes by defining them as “women spaces.” All of the workers indicated that housekeeping was women’s work and this belief fueled their work ethic. By internalizing patriarchal notions of “the women’s place is in the home”, the domestic workers were able to go about their daily routines with the idea that they were labouring away at something women were naturally suited to do. Though I would argue with the participants’ willing acceptance of the dominant ideology, Moss maintains this act constitutes a coping strategy because the house cleaner’s “just do it” (p.188) attitude made the workday easier and more bearable.

Researchers England and Steill conducted an empirical case study in the mid-1990s with live-in Filipino domestic workers in Toronto who found employment through placement agencies. Their study indicates that these women workers develop various coping strategies



by forming close networks with one another in the Phillipine community in Toronto, which is densely populated. One interviewee indicated that despite the fact the domestics were competing with one another for jobs, they were able to remain very cohesive as a group. This, in turn, allowed the women to support one another through difficult circumstances. Because the nature of live-in domestic work does not always guarantee that a worker will have access to privacy in her living quarters, the women pooled their resources and rented an apartment to use on their days off. By creating a space of respite that felt like a safe haven, the workers were able to offset the somewhat restrictive conditions of live-in domestic service.

Glenn (1981) reports that the interviewees in her study of Japanese-American domestic workers in the San Francisco Bay area did not consider domestic work particularly degrading and even preferred it to other types of work. The women workers listed their reasons for this: it was flexible, it permitted greater autonomy as it did not involve being as closely monitored as in factory work, it was a source of income for the woman which was completely under her control, and many built what they considered to be good relationships with their employers. Glenn (1981: 365-67) says that domestic work is considered a "legitimate" form of work in Japanese society because of Japanese cultural codes consisting of a strong work ethic and the cultural acceptability of housework and part-time work (full-time work was seen as strictly a masculine endeavor) for Japanese women.

Thornton-Dill's (1988: 36) study of twenty-six African-American women who were employed as domestics in two northern US cities for most of their working lives reveals that these women were not "embarrassed, disgraced, demeaned, or ashamed of being household workers." These women workers were determined to make their occupational role

personally meaningful and socially acceptable by managing the employee-mistress relationship, building a career, and by finding emotional succor within the Black community.

Rollins (1985) conducted in-depth interviews with twenty employers and twenty women of colour employed as live-in domestics, interviewed personnel of various domestic placement agencies, and conducted group discussions with six of her participants. She also supplemented her interview data by opting to work as a domestic for ten employers in the greater Boston area from September, 1981 to mid-May, 1982. On occasion, Rollins would present herself in front of an employer as a relative and worker trainee of some of the live-in domestics she wanted to interview. By conducting her field research under this ruse, Rollins was able to observe first-hand the conditions of domestic service while she worked in tandem with the participants of her study. Rollins outlines several ways the women in her study coped with the degrading attitudes of many of their employers. She maintains the most powerful weapon the employees used as a counter measure against such treatment was to believe in their self-worth as human beings. The domestics used their standing in the Black community, the quality of their interpersonal relationships, coupled with their understanding of the meaning of race and class in the United States, as ways to deflect their employers' inferior treatment of them. Rollins uses the concept "ressentiment" (a French term adopted by Nietzsche into the German language) to explain the responses of the Black household workers to their mistresses. She explains: "a critical element of resentment is the sense of injustice based on the belief that one does not deserve to be in the subordinate position" (p.226). The women of her study intrinsically understood that they had to behave deferentially in front of their mistresses, but they refused to accept their employers' definitions of them as inferior (Moss, 1997).

Duarte, Galvez and Todaro, and Gogna (cited in Chaney and Garcia Castro, 1989) underscore the importance of "live-out" daytime domestic work in their research on Latin American and Caribbean household workers undertaken in the mid-1980s. Because waged domestic labour is different from factory or assembly work in that the home itself is transformed into a paid workplace (Moss, 1997), live-out day work represents a great improvement over live-in domestic service in terms of personal and emotional benefits for the individual worker (Galvez and Todaro, cited in Chaney and Garcia Castro, 1989). The nature of domestic service is transformed from a quasi-feudal relationship to one where the household worker has a say in how her workday is organized, effectively becoming "her own boss" at the work site (Chaney and Garcia Castro, 1989). Moss (1997) believes that for women who traditionally work in low-paying jobs, this on-site time management is a crucial coping strategy.

Romero's 1992 study of Chicana day household workers in Denver focuses on how private household workers challenged the degrading status of domestic work by transforming and controlling their own labour process (working at their own pace and charging a flat rate so that their employers would not accuse them of working too slowly), effectively professionalizing the nature of domestic service. By positively identifying with the workplace when employed as a domestic/household labourer, a woman worker's self-esteem and status can be greatly enhanced (Moss, 1997).

In their 1994 study of waged domestic labour in contemporary Britain, Gregson and Lowe tackled the question of how those who clean for a living cope with the strong social stigma that is attached to domestic/ household work. The researchers concluded that worker autonomy was central in developing powerful concepts of self-worth and self-respect. By

controlling who they chose to work for, setting their own hours, and deciding which labour tasks they would and would not do (for example, refusing to work in particularly dirty environments), they found their interviewees “were able to counter at the level of the self the social construction of the cleaner as the ‘lowest of the low’ ” (p.216). Their participants stressed the importance of limiting physical contact and/or interaction between the employer and the employee during the working day, effectively ensuring that the domestic/household worker “held all the cards” (Gregson and Lowe, 1994: 228).

Cock’s (1980, 1989) studies of Black live-in and live-out domestic workers in South Africa supported previous studies that had shown that women workers create various coping strategies even under the most politically repressive regimes (England and Steill, 1997). Cock asserts that inwardly, the household workers of her study rejected the unequal power structure that existed between white mistresses and their Black maids, but, they adopted a “mask of deference” (p.104) to shield their real feelings. This mask of deference did not imply that the worker endorsed her own inferior social position in South African society, but that it helped her cope with her situation. While the women of her study were consciously aware of the fact that they were being exploited, they did not accept the legitimacy of their white employer’s power over them and generally remained on good terms with their employers.

Srinivas (1995) points out that in India today, domestic service is status-enhancing for some of the lower castes in comparison to the alternative occupations open to them. Das Gupta’s 1984 study of women domestics in Delhi reveals that these women workers regarded their work as status-enhancing for the following reasons: clean working conditions, convenient working hours, and association with their middle or upper-class mistresses (cited

in Srinivas, 1995). Thornton-Dill (1988: 45), suggests that “workers acquired status in direct relationship to the power, prestige, and wealth of their employers.”

What emerges from this second body of feminist social scientific literature is a discrepancy: on the one hand, for some immigrant workers, domestic service is preferable to other types of work; on the other hand, domestic work has traditionally been accorded low-status in North American society. The researchers I have chosen to discuss in this section focus on the intersections of gender, class, race, and ethnicity affecting immigrant and non-immigrant domestic workers, but also highlights workers' sense of agency and the meaning(s) these women workers give to domestic service.

In sum, there are conflicting images of immigrant domestic workers in much of the social science literature. Some of the positive contributions made by the scholarship that focuses exclusively on structural barriers, is that it outlines some important issues that affect the lives of domestic workers. It also identifies real distinctions between different groups of domestics in terms of race, class, ethnicity and immigration issues. This literature states that these women workers are affected by systems of domination, not personal inadequacies, that keep them in a certain place in the social order, but there are some limitation in this literature. It presents an image of working-class immigrant women as passive victims who have no voice. The scholarship that focuses on the women's sense of agency used interview-based research to support the assertion that even the most disenfranchised worker will struggle to resist job oppression.

There are gaps in the research that maps out Italian immigrant women's historical contributions to the Canadian workforce. Professor Franca Iacovetta is one of the few working-class, second generation, Toronto-raised, feminist researchers whose area of

expertise is Italian-Canadian labour history, but her work on Italian immigrant domestics is not extensive. This lack of research on Italian immigrant domestic workers facilitated the need for this study. It attempts to fill in some of the missing gaps in Italian-immigrant women's history by giving expression to a group of Italian immigrant domestics' voices not previously recorded. It also attempts to use these women's voices to critically examine the images of Italian immigrant women found in Italian-Canadian fiction. In the next section, I underline my rationale for turning to textual sources outside the scope of social scientific literature for information on Italian-Canadian immigrant women.

### **2.3 LITERARY CRITICISM OF ITALIAN-CANADIAN LITERATURE**

In this section, I review the work of a number of critics of Italian-Canadian literature and highlight the central themes in their work relevant to this study. I rely quite extensively on the commentary and insights of one critic in particular, Professor Joseph Pivato. An M.A. thesis written by Elizabeth Sarlo-Hayes (1997) on Italian-Canadian Cultural Studies was used as a supplementary tool in Chapter Five, and greatly enhanced my understanding of how historical fact and literary fiction can be interwoven methodologically. Sarlo-Hayes exposes the variance between Post-World War II Italian immigrant women's experiences found in sociological and historical sources, and those constructed in fictional accounts found in Italian Canadian literature.

There are few literary sources written by the first generation of Italian female immigrants to Canada. It became fairly obvious to me, when I first started researching primary and secondary sources for this thesis, that the sources based on social/historical research were going to offer more glimpses into the daily realities of working-class Italian women's lives than the fictitious sources were (again, save for a few sources I discuss later) because the

latter, for the most part, are written from the imagination of the Canadian-born population and they are one generation removed from the immigration experience. Factual sources, such as oral histories, give the reader a chance to read first-hand accounts of working-class immigrant women's recreated lives. My discovery in no way refutes the importance of Italian-Canadian literary production. As Pivato suggests, "The obscure, often unwritten, history [of forgotten or silenced Italian women] can be approached with considerable perspicacity by combining literary and historical methodologies. The result is a better understanding of the literature and the history" (1986: 79). The fiction can in turn supplement and give texture and life to the facts (Sarlo-Hayes, 1997) and it is a place to begin searching where Italian immigrant women's stories converge and diverge.

Italian-Canadian literary production technically began around the late 1950s and early 1960s and thematically, the works normally deal with the experience of immigration to Canada (Pivato, 1991 and 1998). It is a body of literature written in English, French and Italian and produced by either Italian immigrant writers or Canadian-born authors who have at least one parent of Italian origin (Iannucci, 1992). As I discuss in my methodology section, historically, there were many Italians living in Canada who wrote books, but most were individual works produced in isolation by writers who did not see themselves as creators of a new literature (Pivato, 1998).

Poet, critic, and translator Genni Donati Gunn (1990) believes Italian immigrant women are portrayed by both male and female writers in Italian-Canadian fiction in ways that perpetuate stereotypes. She asserts that what emerges from the literature are images of the immigrant woman who "suffers in silence"; the "ignorant" immigrant woman; the immigrant woman who "accepts" her submissive role; the immigrant woman who stands as a

metonymic symbol for "Mother Italia", the family and an entire culture; and the second generation woman who is struggling to come to terms with having to live amidst two cultures. Generally unmentioned in the fiction are the professional, successful immigrant Italian women who get immense satisfaction from their paid work performed outside of the home, the gifted artist, and the honoured community leader (Donati Gunn, 1990; Di Giovanni, 1993).

Donati Gunn (1990) believes that first-generation Italian women writers seem obsessively concerned with redressing the injustices experienced during their emigration. Although poignant and sensitive, their writing is, by its nature, indulgent and stereotypical. Most first-generation immigrant women perpetuate the oppression of their Canadian-born daughters with the same restrictive rules that governed their behaviour in the Old World. Simultaneously, they desire a better life for their daughters filled with opportunities they never had in Italy. It is no accident that the themes of alienation and duality recur over and over again in much of the literature produced by the second generation of Italian-Canadian authors. Donati Gunn (1990) asserts that the literature written by second- and now third-generation Italian women is more feminist in nature. This stems, in part, from the fact that native-born Italian-Canadian women have grown up in this dual environment and can examine, reject or choose to accept certain factors about their culture through the literature.

Donati Gunn's article was an important part of my literature review because it helped me to understand that many of the first-generation fictional characters in the fiction are crafted from the perspective of the second generation; we see examples of mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and daughters filtered through the lens of their imagination, borne out of the second



generation's experiences. In another section of the thesis, I discuss the relevance of this discovery and its implications.

Susan Iannucci (1992) states Italian-Canadian writing is a body of literature produced, almost without exception, by the children of the immigrants who made the decision to leave Italy after World War II. This group of second generation immigrants were either brought to North America at a young age and spent their formative years here, or they were born in Canada. It is this group who are producing the literature because theirs is the first generation to have the leisure time to write. They have also been given a good education and possess the knowledge to produce works of fiction.

This second generation writing is characterized by certain recurring themes including interpersonal relationships within the family; the generation gap; nostalgia for the idealized past left behind in Italy; the return journey to the Old World which results in the conviction that Canada is where the writer truly belongs; and a confrontation with death as relatives left behind die without their extended family to comfort them. Peripheral to the central themes is the death theme; death stands as a metaphor for alienation and a lost way of life, one that is markedly different from their lifestyle in Italy (Iannucci, 1989 and 1992). Iannucci suggests the second generation's literature is one "which touches both Italy and Canada" and its most prominent theme is a "sense of wandering between two worlds" (1989 and 1992: 224). On the one hand, the writers of this generation appreciate the many sacrifices their parents made for their children, but on the other hand, some are wracked by guilt because they refuse to live up to their parents' expectations for them.

The book, Pillars of Lace: The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Women Writers, (1998), has few portraits of working class women (in the many poems, short stories, essays and meta

dramas selected for the book) but it is one of the few published collections of Italian-Canadian writing in which works by women outweigh those of men. De Franceschi, the editor, explains that there are just as many Italian-Canadian women writers as men but women's experiences have historically been presented from a male perspective. In this collection, she states, "we have evidence of Italian-Canadian women joining forces in relating their own story, their own experience, and thereby constructing their own identity" (p.19). As there is such a scarcity of material on Italian immigrant women's lives (although there are more fictional sources available than factual), this anthology makes an important contribution.

Critic Monica Stellin (1998) writes that gender and ethnicity are two factors which influence each other in literary production by women of Italian background writing in Canada. The traditional roles associated with Italian women are those of caregiver and keepers of the culture and much of the writing by Italian-Canadian women centers around family problems. Women have the responsibility of passing on the mother tongue to their children, and must also maintain and pass on cultural traditions to the next generation. Stellin argues that women's roles in both Canadian and Italian society have changed considerably over the last fifty years and women in both the Old World and the new, have had to deal with the consequences of their changing roles. She points out that because Italian culture is so patriarchal, it has been difficult for the second-generation of women writers to accept a cultural legacy they feel is essentially male-dominated and disrespectful of women, and this is reflected in their works.

Caroline Morgan Di Giovanni maintains that there are a number of diverse images of second-generation women found in the literature that "vary in distinctiveness, detail, and

purpose" (1993: 124). Several of the overlapping themes she identifies in Italian-Canadian literature include the "Dutiful Young Woman" and "The Escape Artist." She states that young, native-born women in immigrant families are forced to negotiate their place between two worlds. This situation finds expression in the literature by various artists who write about female protagonists choosing to leave home and young women who remain defiantly single. Di Giovanni opines that a stereotypical female would accept her submissive role in the family without question, but second-generation female characters in many sources of Italian-Canadian fiction seek ways to fight stereotypes. Citing Mary Di Michele's award-winning poem, *Mimosa* (1981), she explains how this piece presents "contrasting images of young women brought up together in the same household in Toronto's Little Italy" (p.129).

Di Michele's poem *Mimosa* (1981) sets up a dialectic between the "good" sister and the "bad" sister in relation to their traditional Italian immigrant father. Marta is the dutiful daughter who has dedicated her life to serving the needs of her father. Having never lived away from home on her own, she is angry and bitter : "I only want my fair share./I want what's mine and what Lucia kicks over./I want father to stop mooning about her/and listen to my rendition of Mimosa" (p.12). Marta's self-denial has made her petulant and unable to love fully. On the other hand, her sister Lucia, despite her outwardly rebellious nature, is truly loyal to her father. She struggles with feelings of guilt because she left home and carved out a life for herself independent of her father's wishes, but she has gained wisdom that comes with experience. She is able to understand her father's strict temperament, and ultimately, this leads to the ability to love him deeply: "I have his face, his eyes, his hands,/his anxious desire to know everything,/to think, to write everything,/his anxious desire to be heard,/and we love each other and say nothing" (p.16). The point of view of

Vito, their father, is narrated in the third-person and his character represents the silent, first generation of aging post-war Italian immigrants. The reader never entirely knows who he is because his two daughters, having acquired their own voices, speak for him (Hutcheon, 1990). This article was important for this study because it got me thinking about intergenerational conflicts between immigrant parents and their Canadian children. The issue, what parents expect from their children, was a subject that was explored in the interviews for this thesis and it generated a lot of discussion.

A leading scholar in Italian-Canadian writing, Joseph Pivato has written extensively on the representation of immigrant women in Italian-Canadian fiction. One of his main arguments is that the hardships of immigration, particularly the separation of men and women and the breakup of families have had a profound impact on the works of many women writers because "The character types and the life patterns found in [the literature] follow the early models of the migrant workers, men without women and women without men" (1994: 153). The family unit comprising a father, mother and children had traditionally been the model in Italian society but immigration to the New World changed all that as family members were apart for long periods of time. It was not uncommon for male migrant workers to travel alone in the hopes of finding employment abroad and leave their wives and children behind for extended periods of time. Pivato argues that the conditions of emigration changed a "normal" state into an "abnormal" one and very often this situation is recalled in the literature. Pivato cites numerous Italian-Canadian writers who recall stories of relatives left behind or abandoned in Italy. In their works, "the experience of the dismembered family and the memory of this history is part of the inheritance of [these] writers" (1994: 159). He believes this core group of writers critically evaluates the condition

of the immigrant mother or the immigrant daughter and confronts questions of individual freedom and control over one's person in their fiction.

Pivato discusses how the history of Italian immigration to Canada has profoundly affected these women writer's understanding of liberty. He believes that women's "freedom of movement across borders" (1994: 162) was restricted to some degree by husbands who forced their wives to remain in Italy. The image of the body restricted, or imprisoned in some way, is a recurring theme in the fiction of Italian-Canadian women, "the unwritten history of Italian immigrant women. . . is now being reflected in the images of confined bodies, of handicapped characters and other forms of restrictions" (1994: 164). Disability is used as a metaphor to suggest the immigrant's sense of immobility, isolation and "otherness" in Canadian society (1994: 171).

In modern North American society, there is an emphasis placed on the attainment of individual freedom. Immigrant Italian women have had to confront the difficulties that emerge from the clash of different value systems. Pivato reiterates a point made by other critics when he suggests the theme of "duality" as ever present in Italian-Canadian literature. The Italian family is mother-centered and women have traditionally been responsible for taking care of the needs of their family. Mothers desire for their daughters an education and self-advancement while trying to maintain the Old World traditions of marriage and children. This is why, Pivato asserts, "the family in Italian-Canadian writing cannot be separated from the individual identity or from the larger community" (ibid, p.189). Pivato's work was relevant for this thesis because many themes he identifies in the literature were present in my interview data.

In sum, there are some similarities between the social scientific scholarship on Italian immigrant women and the canon of Italian-Canadian literature. In general, there is an absence of Italian immigrant women workers' voices in both of the textual sources. This absence can partially be explained by the fact that most of the social scientific literature and some of the fiction trivialize the experiences of Italian immigrant women. Women workers' voices are either not being researched and recorded, or their experiences are misrepresented by some writers in both bodies of knowledge. The difference between the fiction and the social scientific literature is apparent with regard to workers' sense of agency. Some of the social scientific literature has suggested that Italian immigrant women workers possessed a sense of agency that protected them from being thoroughly victimized by Canadian employers, but Italian women workers' sense of agency was not a major theme in Italian-Canadian literature.

## **2.4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Dorothy Smith (1987) states, “. . . the implications of a sociology for women begins from the discovery of a point of rupture in my/our experience as woman/women within the social forms of consciousness—the culture or ideology of our society—in relation to the world known otherwise” (p.49). The “point of rupture” in my experience began when I started to question how the Italian immigrant women of my mother's generation were being represented through various sources (such as fiction and academic texts), in relation to the preconceived notions I had about this group. I began to sense that there might be a difference between the way the women I wanted to study were socially constructed through social scientific and fictional texts, and the manner in which they constructed their own reality. According to Smith, this “point of rupture” or potential difference in consciousness

is called a "line of fault" and provides a starting point from which feminist researchers can begin to explore the place where this disjuncture occurs and start to build new theories.

Smith believes that as feminist scholars trained in a specific methodological and theoretical manner, we have a "special responsibility" to uncover and document the existence of "this point of rupture. . . by asking how it is organized, how it is determined, [and] what the social relations are that generate it" (1987: 49-50). Smith opines that the women's movement has provided a forum where feminist theorists could ask these questions. She cites many examples of pioneering texts of the women's movement from the twentieth century. These early works discovered the lines of fault between experience and social forms of expression that occurred because there was a power differential between men and women, identified and labeled as "patriarchy." Ruling relations (which men dominated) controlled women's consciousness, forms of thought, and means of expression. Smith defines these ruling relations as:

a complex or organized practices, including government, law, business and financial management, professional organization, and educational institutions as well as the discourses in texts that interpenetrate the multiple sites of power (1987: 3).

Women, standing outside the circles or realms of power, did not speak in a language that was suitable for articulating their experiences; moreover, women's consciousness was not validated as a source of knowledge.

As the relations of ruling in society are mediated in part, by texts, texts become part of a powerful medium. Following an ideology not inconsistent with the works of Marx and Engels, Smith argues that in our society, only those in positions of power produce culture because they have the means at their disposal to do so. The privileged classes, "dominate the

means of production. . . culture is actually produced by specialists occupying influential positions" intent on maintaining the status quo (Smith, 1987: 19). She states that women have been largely absent from producing culture; I would argue that this is especially true for the immigrant, working classes who had neither the time to write, nor the language and education required to write.

Smith advocates a "sociology for women" from a "women's standpoint" as an alternative way to conduct feminist research. It is her contention that feminist sociology must begin with real, concrete people and their lives to refute the dominant ideologies about women and their place in the world. She also suggests that researchers start, as a point of departure, from the actual daily lives of women and move from there to examine how these dominant ideologies shape everyday life:

The standpoint of women. . . I am deploying here cannot be equated with a perspective or world view. It does not universalize a particular experience. It is rather a method that, at the outset of inquiry, creates the space for an absent subject, and an absent experience that is to be filled with the presence and spoken experience of actual women speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday worlds. . . This is a standpoint designed in part by our exclusion from the making of culture. . . and the strategies of resorting to our experience as the ground of a new knowledge, a new culture. But it is also designed by an organization of work that has typically been ours, for women's work, as wives, secretaries, and in other ancillary roles (1987: 107-108).

Smith's suggestion lends itself well to this study as I used the feminist assumption that "the personal is political" as a location from which to frame my perspective when I began conducting my research. Documenting a line of fault between women's experiences and the way in which they are socially constructed through social science texts and fictional texts involves exploring Italian immigrant women's experiences in the everyday world of the job site and in the home. These women perform multiple roles as both paid and unpaid workers.



Interviews (both taped and hand-written) were used to examine the everyday world of the participants through their eyes. The social construction of Italian immigrant women in literature is explored in later chapters. Feminist research can benefit from discovering the everyday world of a group of women traditionally silenced or misrepresented by mainstream society.

Brettell and Simon James (1986) stress the importance of paying attention to the cultures of the sending societies and to the ways in which the status and roles of women are defined in them. The authors suggest that the status and roles of immigrant women in the sending society differ in practice from ideology:

... cultural differences, whether those brought from home or those encountered in the receiving society or a juxtaposition of both, shape the ways in which both the [labour] constraints and opportunities are experienced and/or with which they are coped (p.19).

A comparison that can uncover patterns in the relationship between cultural background and the process of adaptation to the work environment can be a useful analytical tool. To reconcile the common-sense assumptions about the negative aspects of domestic/household work, an approach that favors the perceptions of the immigrant women worker herself cannot be over-estimated. An "outsider" may observe a group as miserable or downtrodden, while insiders may not share this view. One must be extremely careful about whose definition of oppression is emphasized (Brettell and Simon James, 1986).

Morokvasic (1983, cited in Brettell and Simon James, 1986) questions whether the analytical distinction between the "traditional culture" (the emigrant's sending society) as opposed to the "modern culture" (the immigrant's receiving society) is appropriate. Immigrant women move from one cultural context to another, and gross assumptions are

often made about the cultural background of each newly arrived immigrant. The most common assumption, Morokvasic maintains, is that prior to their arrival in the host country, immigrant women never worked for a waged salary. My research for this study repudiates that common and often incorrect assumption.

## **2.5 METHODOLOGIES**

This thesis has adopted the Grounded theory approach developed by sociologists Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s (Hutchinson, 1988). Grounded theory is a qualitative methodology which uses "an inductive approach to analyzing data" (Reinharz, 1992: 18). As a contradistinction to the "positivist" or traditional scientific understanding of the world which sees human subjects in a more or less static form, grounded theory believes human reality is "socially and symbolically constructed, always emerging and relative to other facts of social life" (Hutchinson, 1988: 124). The grounded theory method offers a systematic approach for generating empirical knowledge based in and about the "real" world. Fundamental to this concept is the researcher's ability to discover and conceptualize the essence of specific inter-related processes such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity (Hutchinson, 1988).

Grounded theory uses an actor-centered approach based on the idea of discovering the world through the eyes of its participants; therefore, it was a useful analytical tool for uncovering how the immigrant Italian women I interviewed interacted on a daily basis to give meaning to their working lives. In order to understand patterns of experience, grounded theory researchers gather data about the "lived" experiences of its participants, and grounded theories are guided by the assumption that people do, in fact, have patterns of experience (Hutchinson, 1988: 125). Like Rollins (1985: 8), my approach to this study is

based on the notion that those who have lived an experience know more about it than those who have not. Since there is very little literature on immigrant Italian domestic workers, the women I interviewed for this thesis, in essence, remain the “experts” on their situation (Romero, 1992). Grounded theory is also useful when little is known about a topic (Hutchinson, 1988).

Scarpaci (1978) states that because Italian immigrant women have been oppressed and exploited both as women and as workers, union records have the potential to show if Italian women workers served on picket lines, paid dues or demanded just wages for their labour. However, the isolating nature of domestic service did not give the Italian household workers of this study the opportunity to organize themselves into unions or other formal associations.<sup>7</sup> This researcher, therefore, delved into other sources of empirical data to uncover if disenfranchised domestic workers faced systems of oppression in their everyday lives in a more positive, pro-active way. This study has used three data collection methods---journaling, in-depth interviews and qualitative content analysis (literary criticism falls under the rubric of qualitative content analysis).

### **Journaling**

One of the strengths of using Grounded theory as a methodological approach, is that it forces the researcher to become more aware of her own behaviour while observing the behaviour of her participants. As Hutchinson (1988: 130) writes, when a researcher immerses herself into the field to collect data, “[s]he must become aware of [her] own preconceptions, values, and beliefs.” Hutchinson calls this process “bracketing” and she

maintains that "bracketing" refers not only to the researcher being aware of her own personal values but also her ability to transcend them during the research process in an effort to see a problem from a new perspective (p.130). The author suggests keeping a daily journal as a strategy whereby one's personal feelings and reflections are recorded to aid the researcher to become more aware of and "bracket" her own values. This theoretical approach had a particular appeal for me as I came to this study freely admitting that I had my own personal biases about what constitutes an immigrant Italian woman. I kept a small journal where I recorded my private thoughts and impressions after each and every taped interview. These initial "scribbles" proved time and time again to be invaluable and gave me a greater understanding of the complexities of each participant's working life.

### **In-depth Interviews**

I used my "insider/outsider" position as a second-generation Italian-Canadian who grew up in one of Toronto's Little Italies, to find the post-war immigrant Italian women who worked or continue to work as either live-in or live-out domestic/household workers in the Toronto area interviewed for this study. Potential interviewees were contacted using various methods. I asked my mother's permission to interview her first and then asked her to refer me to other women she personally knew who had worked as domestics. Two key contacts who live and work in a professional capacity in a high-density Italian neighbourhood were asked to provide referrals for other potential interviewees. Finally, I found other interviewees by snowball sampling.

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\* INTERCEDE, founded in the early 1980s by a group of women researchers, academics and lawyers in Toronto, is a group that lobbies to obtain policy and legal changes that will benefit domestic workers (Bakan and Stasula, 1997). None of the women of my study used the services of this organization.

Thirteen women were interviewed between June and December 1997. Interviews of two to four hours were conducted using a format that attempted to elicit information related to: personal data, work history, and personal observations. My questions tried to uncover the participants'

- experience with paid domestic employment in Italy (if any) and Canada
- their family composition and family and community life experience both in Italy and Canada
- the structure and nature of their daily domestic working activities<sup>8</sup>.

Taped interviews were transcribed. During the few times when interviewees would not allow me to use a tape recorder, I hand wrote their narratives on paper. Quotations were selected verbatim from the taped and non-taped interviews. Participants' names have been changed to disguise the identities of the women interviewed. The ethics committee at Memorial University accepted and approved my proposal in the Spring of 1996 to conduct participant based interviews. I believe that my participants were open and honest with me in disclosing their personal histories (Gunderson et al., 1990). The interviewees were encouraged to talk freely at any point during the taping session. I firmly believe my mother's presence encouraged my participants to open up a dialogue about their life experiences in Canada.

Reinharz (1992: 215) suggests that the use of "non-traditional" research methods "reflects the researcher's effort to create a new approach that [meets] her feminist criteria." Similarly, she maintains that the researcher's decision to set up a "dialogue" or "conversation" between herself and her interviewees is, "another feminist methodological

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8. For a complete list of interview questions, please see Appendix C. In the appendices written in Italian, I had to add by hand proper accent marks because the computer program I used for this thesis is written in English.

invention that experiments with the nonauthorial voice by using multiple voices" (Reinharz, 1992: 229). I see using my mother's input or presence in the interview process as an "original or non-traditional" feminist research method. By consciously downplaying my role as a graduate student researcher and playing up my role as a daughter, I tried to foster trust between myself and my participants.

Data collection strategies such as participant observation and open-ended interviewing frequently rely on the grounded theory perspective (Hutchinson, 1988). Reinharz (1992: 197) states that multiple methods:

enable feminist researchers to link past and present 'data gathering' ...and individual behaviour with social frameworks. In addition, feminist researchers use multiple methods because of changes that occur to them. . . in a project of long duration.

As well, the multiple method data collection techniques used in grounded theory research diminish bias by increasing the wealth of information available to the researcher, thereby making the study more scientifically credible (Reinharz, 1990; Hutchinson, 1988).

The research methods I have chosen in this thesis are similar to the data collection strategies of Grounded theory research outlined by Hutchinson in Sherman & Webb's Qualitative Research in Education: Focus and Methods (1988). Hutchinson (1988: 125) states that:

[In-depth] interviews permit researchers to verify, clarify, or alter what they thought happened, to achieve a full understanding of an incident, and to take into account the 'lived' experience of participants.

Reinharz (1992) goes further to say that interviewing is particularly important for the study of women as it offers researchers access to their ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher. This asset is a remedy to centuries of

ignoring women's words or having men speak for women (p.19). As well, the value of the interviewing process is in the voices of the participants, their individual richness that remains meaningful in their own right (England and Stiehl, 1997: 204). When an oral interview is structured by the narrator instead of the researcher, it allows each woman to express her uniqueness in its full class, racial, and ethnic richness. Each woman can tell us how she comes to value or devalues herself (and this includes how she views her self-worth on the job). As Jack (1991: 18) sees it:

a person's self-reflection is not just a private, subjective act. The categories and concepts we use for reflecting upon and evaluating ourselves come from a cultural context, one that has historically demeaned and controlled women's activities. Thus, an exploration of the language and meanings women use to articulate their own experience leads to an awareness of the conflicting social forces and institutions affecting women's consciousness [The interview] reveals how women act either to restructure or preserve their psychological orientations, ... and their social contexts.

In-depth interviews have enabled me to lend meaning to the lived work experiences of my participants by the discovery of "core variables" —social psychological processes that illuminate the main themes of my participants' behavior. The core variables link the data together and explain what is going on in the data. These variables become the basis for the generation of new theories (Hutchinson, 1988). Jack (1991) suggests that the researcher conducting the interview listens as an active participant to the "moral language" of the narrator: moral self-evaluation statements allow the researcher to examine the relationship between self-concept and cultural norms. The job of the researcher is to identify key phrases in the narrator's statements. In this study, I heard things like: "We had no choice," repeated over and over again in each interview I conducted. The author defines these key phrases as formal markers that express the harmony, indifference, the ambiguity, the conflict, etc.

existing between the self and the society as a whole. This has led me to a greater understanding of the hidden meanings that lie in the sub-text of my interview transcripts and it has helped me to format my analysis.

Harney (1977: 128) writes that oral data collection methods are (probably) some of the best ways by which a researcher can reconstitute important segments of the Italian ethnic past of Toronto. He also feels that oral testimony should be viewed as part of a whole deposit of ethnic and immigration sources, demonstrating that the study of ethnicity is at its best when it crosses disciplines (p.4).

Reinharz (1992:41) suggests that research that uses oral sources is typically used with two frequently overlapping types of people: older and relatively powerless people. Anderson (1991) believes that oral research sources can not only tell us how people did things, but whether what they were doing was fun or drudgery, accompanied by a sense of pride or failure. These criteria lend themselves well to this study.

### **Qualitative Content Analysis**

Qualitative content analysis entails the systematic examination of forms of communication to objectively document patterns. Its function is threefold: as an overall approach, a method, and an analytic strategy. "The raw material of content analysis may be any form of communication, usually written materials (such as textbooks, novels, and newspapers)" (Marshall and Rossman, 1985: 85). For this thesis, I have included literary sources such as poetry, fictitious oral histories, biographies and autobiographies. Whitt (1991: 411) opines that, "Because they are written in the language of the setting and reflect priorities. . . of insiders, documents can provide rich insights into the setting. . . being studied." Content analysis lent itself well to this thesis as its greatest strength is that, unlike



human respondents, documents are readily available, stable, and nonintrusive sources of information (Marshall and Rossman, 1995).

Tirabassi (1992) writes that qualitative sources—literature, biographies, autobiographies, and novels—can pose significant questions for feminist researchers that quantitative sources may not. Del Negro (1997: 25) suggests, “While quantitative methods often reduce human experience to statistics, qualitative methods can give insight into the complexities of women’s motivations, desires and life experiences. What such approaches lack in breadth, they make up in depth. . . .” Qualitative content analysis of Italian-Canadian literary sources has enabled me to explore the social construction of Italian immigrant women in these sources.

### **Sampling**

My sample documents have included these literary genres: poems, novels, plays, and novellas written by Italian-Canadian authors. Most sources were culled from university reference libraries, public libraries, bookstores, *Eyetalian* and *Effe* magazines, The Columbus Centre in Toronto, Guernica Editions publications, and word-of-mouth sources. There are over 120 writers of Italian background in Canada comprising three groups: the older generation writing mostly (but not always) in Italian; the younger generation writing in English; and a separate group of Quebecois writers working mostly in French (Pivato, 1998). Although I read Italian and English fluently (and some French), for the purposes of this study I had to limit my selection. The task of translation is a daunting one and due to time limitations, most of the texts I chose to analyze were originally written in English. All translations that appear in this thesis are mine unless otherwise stated.

I tried to be inclusive of a wide variety of Italian-North American (but primarily Canadian) writers and literary forms. I also tried to limit my selection to writers who had been previously published. Unfortunately, some of my sources are very rare, obscure, or no longer available in print (Pivato, 1998). The texts used in the sample were selected with a certain criterion in mind. Historically, there were many Italian writers and many books written by Italians living in Canada, but they did not constitute a conscious new bi-cultural literature. Since the production of literature in Italy has traditionally been dominated by the upper classes, and the writing of Italian-Canadian literature has been characterized as one produced by displaced people, this body of work has low status in Italy (Pivato, 1994). D'Alfonso (1996: 127) emphasizes:

La Biblioteca nazionale di Milano categorically refuses to recognize the existence of Italian-language books and magazines outside their borders by not allowing their International Standard Book Number to be used by anyone except the presses working in Italy.

The works I selected were written, made, produced, and published in Canada by first and second generation Italian-Canadian authors. As Iannucci (1989: 224) describes it, Italian-Canadian writing "is a body of literature produced by writers who have at least one parent of Italian origin. It is a literature that touches both Italy and Canada."

In his book of essays, *Contrasts*, Pivato (1991: 30) defines ethnic writing in Canada as, "writing that is concerned with the meeting of two (or more) cultures in which one of the cultures is Anglophone or Francophone." There are major themes that characterize the genre of Italian-Canadian writing, most notably is a focus on the process of acculturation, and a nostalgia for a return to the past. Other recurrent themes overtly or covertly present in

Italian-Canadian literature relate to gender, class, ethnicity, identity, and familial and work relationships (Iannucci, 1992; Minni, 1989; Tuzi, 1997; and De Franceschi, 1998).

## **2.6 CONSIDERATIONS**

This study is not without its limitations. The purpose of the interviews was to generate information about the real-life situation and attitudes of post-war Italian immigrant women who worked as domestic/household workers in the greater Toronto area. Although the researcher came from the same socio-economic and cultural background, some differences must be highlighted. The researcher is a second-generation, Italian-Canadian, university-educated single and childless woman in her late thirties. All of the women in the study are Italian-born, married and/or widowed, ranging in age from forty-five to seventy-six years old, with one or more children (and in some cases, grandchildren). Although the researcher has worked as a domestic/household worker during various periods in her life, clearly there are differences between my labour experiences and those of my participants.

Although my supervisor and advisors initially suggested at the proposal stage that I study my own ethnic group, I personally had reservations about this. I was ambivalent about whether or not I could, as a researcher, rise above my own biases. Sturino (1975-1980: 10) warns about the dangerous effect of "studying one's own ethnic group [which] involves emotional ties, whether negative or positive, that could colour one's vision of his/[her] subject." In retrospect, my ethnic similarity with the women being interviewed was a definite asset. The relationship of trust between the researcher and the participants based on ethnic ties and language skill was a taken-for-granted bonus. For the most part, the interviews went well. I had already established a long-standing personal relationship with one third of my interviewees, which facilitated easy and open communication; however, I found it difficult to

emotionally and psychologically distance myself from my participants whenever I opened up old wounds during the taping process. Some of the life experiences they re-created for me were very painful to listen to. I had doubts about pushing the boundaries of my personal relationships in order to gather information. On the other hand, I have come to realize that the positive aspects of this study outweigh the negative, as these interviews provided my participants with an opportunity to tell both sides of their story, good and bad (Sturino, 1975-1980).

As a cautionary final note I wish to add that the qualitative part of this study was never intended to be systematic or representative in any statistical sense (Gunderson et al. 1990). From a strictly sociological viewpoint, this study does not draw upon a representative sample of immigrant Italian women in the city of Toronto (Del Negro, 1997). Every effort was made to record my interviewee's life experiences clearly and concisely. Furthermore, all shortcomings in this thesis are mine alone.

## **2.7 SUMMARY**

The focus of chapter two has been the research objectives, theory and methods that form the framework of this thesis. This chapter also explored the social scientific literature and Italian-Canadian fiction that were relevant for this study. Dorothy Smith's feminist sociological theory provides the basis for the theoretical review. Grounded Theory was used as a methodological guide to capture the daily labour-coping experiences of immigrant Italian domestic workers from their perspective, using their own words.

Three methods of research were used for this thesis. A qualitative content analysis were used to gather information from first-generation Italian domestics. A qualitative content analysis of Italian-Canadian literary sources was used to examine the social construction of

first-generation Italian women in the fiction, particularly domestic/household workers. It documents formal themes and strategies found in these sources. This is the focus of Chapter Three.

Semi-structured oral interviews and journaling were used to gather information from first-generation Italian domestics. These in-depth interviews were conducted as a co-operative and joint effort between myself and my mother. The data present Italian immigrant women as active agents in their daily working lives, which contrasts with the stereotypical image of the immigrant domestic as a passive, reactive and powerless woman found in some social scientific literature. It also gives the reader a fuller picture of the quality and condition of the women's lives that impersonal statistical datum fails to reveal. Data from the interview sessions represent the focus of Chapter Four

### Chapter 3

## IMMIGRANT ITALIAN WOMEN IN ITALIAN-CANADIAN LITERATURE

*"Sta Zitta. Don't make trouble! Non far mala figura," my mother always said/ but I say: Let us tell our mothers "Sta zitta." / Let us tell them we don't care about mala figura. / Let us put the pieces of Columbus back together, even if the cracks show, the imperfections. "Columbus and the Road to Glory" In Where I Come From, by Maria Mazziotti Gillan.*

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores some of the major themes emerging from contemporary Italian-Canadian fiction that are relevant to the social construction of Italian immigrant women. The field of literary criticism provided a framework for the qualitative content analyses of the fiction with regards to literary conventions: thematic structure, imagery, symbolism, and so on. Following feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith's theoretical position outlined in the Chapter Two, I also look for the gaps, silences, and absences in what the literature is suggesting or not suggesting about Italian immigrant women. A section of this chapter is devoted to uncovering how Italian women workers are constructed in the fiction.

Italian-Canadian literary production technically began around the late 1950s and early 1960s. Chronologically, the literature can be roughly divided into two sections: Post-War first generation writing and second-generation writing that started being published in the late 1970s. As previously discussed, there were many Italians living in Canada who wrote books, but most were individual works produced in isolation by writers who did not see themselves as creators of a new literature (Pivato, 1998). Thematically there are areas that overlap between the two bodies of writing, but first-generation writers have a stronger link to Italy

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<sup>1</sup> "Sta zitta" in Italian is a command that literally means, "Keep quiet." "Mala figura" is more difficult to translate but it roughly means "A bad impression." The poet's mother is chiding her daughter to keep quiet and not to give American society a bad impression of immigrant Italians.

because they are the generation that migrated from one continent to the other; therefore, Italy figures more prominently in their writing (De Franceschi, 1998). The later generation of writers, born and educated in Canada, are more temporally and geographically distant from Italy; consequently, they can only write about immigration as a second-hand experience (De Franceschi, 1998). This discovery was significant in that it helped me to understand how the second generation of writers conceptualized the first generation of Italian immigrants in the literature. As the material presented in Chapter Three relies extensively on the literary works of the second-generation of Italian-Canadian writers, this chapter provides explanations why the two bodies of writing (first generation and second generation) are different.

### **3.2 EARLY STAGES: Works by First-Generation Italian Immigrant Women**

One of the earliest works by a first-generation woman of Italian background in Canada is Elena Albani's novel, Canada, mia seconda patria (Canada, My Second Homeland) which was published in 1958 (Golini, 1998). Albani's novel revolves around the traumatic separation of a family of Italian expatriates in Montreal in 1940. The novel's nineteen-year-old heroine, Claudia Moreni, is left alone in Canada with her young daughter Anna while her husband, Michele, returns to Italy to straighten out some of his business affairs. In June of that year Canada declares war on Italy and severs diplomatic ties which means that Claudia is unable to communicate with her husband. The remainder of the novel chronicles the struggles Claudia must endure to survive the difficult war years in Canada. To keep herself occupied during the many months of waiting to hear from her husband, she gets a job in an office as a secretary. Claudia also develops a romantic relationship with an English Canadian man named Bruce Ansley. When the news of her husband Michele's death during the war in Italy reaches Claudia, she and Bruce eventually marry (Pivato, 1986; 1994).

Pivato (1994) asserts that one positive aspect about Canada, mia seconda patria is that the novel examined an issue that deeply affected first-generation women before and after World War II: the temporary separation of husbands and wives during this period of great social upheaval and change. Although Claudia can be seen as a symbol of feminine tenacity and courage in that she breaks with tradition by marrying outside the bounds of Italian culture (Golini, 1998), what is particularly problematic about this work of fiction is that at a time when Claudia starts to enjoy a taste of personal freedom and is forced to act independently, she replaces one man in her life with another. Albani's protagonist attains a kind of social mobility and economic independence that might have been denied to her back in Italy yet, the author implies Italian immigrant women are incapable of living alone without a man in their lives. Although Canada, My Second Homeland broaches the issue of the isolation of ethnic women due to cultural displacement, it ignores the possibility that a deserted Italian immigrant woman/wife might be capable of acting resourcefully to take care of herself and her children (Pivato, 1986; Golini, 1998).

In contrast to Albani's first work of fiction, her 1979 novel, Diario di una emigrante (Diary of an Immigrant Woman), is a realistic fictionalized biography of an unnamed immigrant peasant woman. The protagonist of the story is a strong figure who is able to lead her family through the uncertainties caused by war (Stellin, 1998). When her husband is sent to an internment camp for carrying a banner during a Fascist rally in Montreal, the heroine is left to run the family farm alone with her two small children. Unable to physically manage, she rents the farm out and moves to the city. By working diligently at various jobs as a seamstress, hairdresser, waitress and cashier, she is able to prosper financially and save the farm from ruin. But she pays a heavy price that exacts its toll on her personal happiness.



But I was not really at peace. Maybe for this reason I always worked so hard...If I stopped working a long pain would grab my heart, a pain which came from many problems and from nothing. Then I felt I was a stranger to myself, to my children and to the place where I lived. And I was not happy with my life (*The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Writing*, 1998: 32).

Stellin (1998: 9) maintains that Albani's character represents probably the only truly feminist character depicted by a first-generation Italian-Canadian woman writer. The fictionalized diary is interesting because it exposes all the angst of the immigrant experience from a feminine perspective

Maria Ardizzi was born in Italy but moved to Toronto in 1954 after she finished her studies in Rome. She wrote a trilogy of "immigrant" novels starting with *Made in Italy* (1982) and culminating with the 1990 publication of *Tra le colline e di là dal mare* (Golini, 1998; Pivato, 1998). Ardizzi's first novel has a powerful main character who is in the senior years of her life, Nora Moratti. At the beginning of the novel, Nora is a young woman who shares with her husband the desire to emigrate because she believes her life in North America will be much better than the one she had in Italy. While her husband Vanni achieves financial success in Canada through hard work, the time spent away securing his fortune drives a wedge between his wife and family that permanently damages their relationship. Halfway through the novel, Vanni and Nora are no longer speaking and their three grown children have moved away and no longer visit their parents. When one of her sons dies, Nora has a complete physical and mental breakdown that leaves her paralyzed and unable to speak (though she is left with the ability to hear and comprehend). Though Nora is a "strong woman who has been toughened by her immigrant experiences" (Pivato, 1985: 175), by the end of the novel, Nora feels completely alienated from her children, her husband and ultimately, herself. In contrast to *Made in Italy*, in Maria Ardizzi's second

novel, *Il sapore agro della mia terra* (1984), the poverty of the Italian *contadina*<sup>10</sup> in the Marghera country of the Abruzzi region in south-central Italy is contrasted with her new life in the Toronto of the 1950s construction boom. The protagonist of the novel, Sara Valtroni, wants to escape the grinding poverty of peasant life by emigrating to Canada. In contrast to the rest of the family, who see the move to Canada as a way of reuniting kin, Sara regards emigration as an opportunity to break away from the repressive old ways of southern Italian superstition, male dominance, harsh farm labour, and the culturally embedded codes that dictate wives and daughters should be submissive to men (Pivato, 1994). Sara states aloud to herself, “Io voglio andare a scuola. Voglio conoscere il mondo fuori della Marghera. Lo sai quante citta’ ci sonno. . . ?” (Ardizzi, 1984: 11).<sup>11</sup>

Ardizzi’s Sara represents a move towards the creation of a more feminist literary character in Italian-Canadian literature—one that refutes the traditional image of the fully oppressed immigrant woman. Unlike other immigrant women portrayed in Italian-Canadian literature, Sara is not bothered by the difficulty of locating to a new country. She is determined to be independent from the men in her family. In her desire to become a full person and not “just another immigrant,” she rejects all the old roles imposed upon her by her culture. Pivato (1985: 185) opines, “The character of Sara Valtroni is memorable as an image of the new woman in immigrant literature.” She studies privately and struggles to further her education. Through her struggles to integrate into mainstream Canadian life while retaining cultural ties to the old world left behind in Italy, Sara achieves a state of self-awareness that is marked by a deep sense of her own immigrant duality (Pivato, 1985): “Io,

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10 Peasant woman worker.

11 “I want to go to school. I want to know the world outside Marghera. Do you know how many cities there are?”

chi sono?... sono un'emigrante. Non sarò mai separata dal mio vecchio mondo, ho pensato. . . Rimarro qualcosa di mezzo, che non sta né da una parte né dall'altra?" (Ardizzi, 1984: 175).<sup>12</sup>

In sum, through Ardizzi and Albani's novels, readers are given a glimpse into the life of Post-War Italian women written from the experiences of first-generation immigrants. A theme that is prevalent in the literature deals with the fragmentation of the immigrant family due to the temporary separation of spouses and parents from their loved ones. The female protagonists have to deal with their sense of physical and cultural dislocation as a result of moving from one country to another, and this issue is dealt with in the fiction in several ways. Some of the novels have heroines scripted as strong characters who can overcome adversity but don't dismiss the hardships immigrant Italian women have had to suffer. Some works portray a negative and somewhat depressing picture of what life might have been like for certain Italian immigrant women; other works offer more romantic versions of the immigrant experience.

### 3.3 WRITERS FROM MY TIME

Though Italian-Canadian literature did not exist as an identifiable entity before 1978, and there were no literary studies of Italian writers in Canada before 1982, nonetheless, there is a corpus or body of work that has been flowering since the late 1970s (Pivato, 1985-88).<sup>13</sup> Hutcheon (1986) estimated that by 1971, over one third of Canada's Italian-Canadian population consisted of second generation immigrants, so it is not surprising to see that the

<sup>12</sup> "Me, who am I? ... I am an immigrant. I have not fully separated from my old world, I thought. . . Will I remain as something always in the middle, who is not part of one world nor the other?"

<sup>13</sup> Most historical critics of Italian-Canadian literature will agree that the publication of Pier Giorgio Di Cicco's anthology of poetry entitled *Rainie Candler, 1978* acted as a springboard for Italian-Canadian literary production. Pivato (1998: 12) states: "This writer was the first person to realize that the possibility for a distinct body of literature did exist in Canada."

seventies and eighties have brought about the coming of age of writing for this generation. Some of the contemporary authors were born in Italy but they spent their formative years in Canada as they emigrated with their parents at a very young age. This generation, of which I am a part of, are the university educated sons and daughters of Post-War Italian immigrants and it is this group of writers which is producing much of the Italian-Canadian literature that can be found on bookstore shelves. While these writers cannot be regarded as a homogenous group, what these poets, playwrights and novelists have in common is that they share an Italian immigrant background (with at least one parent), and they set their novels within this cultural milieu. Their works are published in French, Italian, English, or sometimes, a combination of all three languages. Despite working in isolation from one another many of these writers explore similar immigrant themes in their writing (Di Giovanni, 1993; D'Alfonso, 1996 and Hutcheon, 1990).

The most prominent literary theme in contemporary Italian-Canadian writing, is the "sense of wandering between two worlds" (Iannucci, 1992: 224). Peripheral to this central theme are others like relationships within the family; nostalgia for an idealized past in Italy; a return journey to Italy culminating in the conviction that Canada is home after all; a confrontation with death as family members die in the old country separated from immigrating kin; and tales of hardship and success (Iannucci, 1992). As immigrants fitting into the Canadian ethnic mosaic, writers articulate the problems a newcomer might experience: problems coping with change, poverty, conflicting values, social, psychological, and physical alienation (Hutcheon, 1990). Italian-Canadian literature has its roots in the world of its everyday, ordinary citizens which is in direct contrast to the literature of Italy which has been traditionally dominated by an urban literary elite (Pivato, 1994).

Many literary works of the later generation of Italian-Canadian writers chronicle the disparities and problems produced when newly arrived immigrant women struggle to integrate two cultures—the one they left behind in Italy and the one they embrace in Canada (Pivato, 1988; Donati Gunn, 1990). To borrow an image from Mary di Michele's poem Enigmatico that nicely captures this dynamic, the Italian-Canadian immigrant woman "cries out caught/ with one bare foot in a village in the Abruzzi /<sup>14</sup>the other busy with cramped English speaking toes in Toronto" (cited in DiCicco, 1978). In, How to Kill Your Father, from the 1981 collection Mimosa and Other Poems, the violent image of killing the father symbolically represents the younger generation's desire to eliminate the old world outmoded order to make way for the New World which is represented by Canada (Golini, 1993):

You are alone on the highway to the sun/Your north American education/has taught you how to kill a father,/but you are walking down an Italian/way, so you will surrender/and visit him in the hospital/where you will be accused/of wishing his death/in wanting a life/for yourself (Di Michele, 1981: 36).

The novelist Caterina Edwards grew up in Alberta with an English father and an Italian mother. Her work explores what it means to be an immigrant living in Canada with Italian roots and an Italian background (Golini, 1993). Edwards' heroine, Bianca Bolato in the 1982 novel, The Lion's Mouth, refutes many dominant stereotypes about second-generation Italian-Canadian women. She is presented as a truly "modern" woman who can live without a man in her life. Bianca is a creative writer who emigrated to Western Canada from Venice with her parents as a young girl. It is no accident that Edwards chose to script her protagonist as a creative writer. Through her writing, Bianca discovers that her identity cannot be bound up with that of a man; she must find a sense of her own self. Individual

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<sup>14</sup> A region: province in south-central Italy.

freedom and independence are fundamentally important for Bianca's development as a character and as a person (Pivato, 1986).

Bianca's parents live out "the dream of immigration" vicariously through their daughter. She grows up with the usual tensions of the second generation experience, feeling painfully different from her Canadian-born classmates. Her parents dress her in Italian clothing but practicality would dictate that she wear Canadian-style clothing to combat the harsh winter elements. Bianca is desperate to fit in with all the other Canadian-born kids she is forced to ride with on the school bus every day:

I would beg her [her mother] not to make me wear the clothes she had sent from Venice: a camel coat with black velvet collar, smocked woolen dresses, sensible leather shoes. I longed for ski jackets, jeans, shiny plastic shoes like everyone else's. But she was immovable (Edwards, 1982: 114).

Bianca, trained in a Catholic girls' school, chooses a university away from home as her means of liberation once she reaches the age of consent. Her mother objects and Bianca begins to reflect that,

[She] was beginning to feel that inevitable gulf between the immigrant parents and the child. I began to answer Mamma's 'Do you want to be like one of those Canadians?' with 'Yes, yes, yes.' I hadn't rejected Venice, but I wanted protective colouring. I wanted camouflage. . . (Edwards, 1982: 117).

Yet Bianca emerges in control of her own experience and finds an equilibrium between the two worlds. She knows who she is and where she comes from. She accepts herself. As an adult she buys her own home, and lives the life of a mature and independent professional. This is the image of life which every immigrant parent desires for their children except for the fact that Bianca is unmarried and childless. By playing off the stereotypes (home acquisition, marriage and children), the immigrant dream of Bianca's parents comes to its fruition although not in any way they could have envisioned (Di Giovanni, 1993).

Irony is one way of coming to terms with the “doubleness” of the ethnic identity: it allows a writer to speak to the dominant culture from within its set of values and modes of understanding, without being co-opted by it and without sacrificing the right to dissent, contradict, and resist (Hutcheon, 1990). One of the most important roles of literature by ethnic and racial minorities in Canada can be to make the dominant and dominating cultures self-conscious (Tuzi, 1997). Pivato (1994: 73) states:

The value of the ethnic writer is that he or she speaks from the margins of the central culture. As an outsider he or she has all the freedom to be creative, to be critical, to give us the other point of view. It is the paradox of the ethnic writer that he or she has a central role in our culture by speaking from the margins.

Ethnic women are doubly marked as outsiders by the two-fold nature of the immigrant woman's status—by the disadvantage of being both a woman and an immigrant. The double sense of alienation and powerlessness that accompanies female gendered “otherness” has led writers to use irony (saying one thing, meaning another) as a subversive tactic (Hutcheon, 1990).

For immigrants, the need to resist may be intensified because of the weight of cultural tradition, made heavier by distance and time, by memory, a sense of exile, or simple nostalgia. Therefore, the drive toward self-definition within a new culture may well involve separation from this ethnic past, at least temporarily. And irony is a useful device for articulating both the pull of that tradition and the need to contest it. Of course, it is also an obvious way to challenge ethnic stereotyping (Hutcheon, 1990).

A study in narrative irony is *Marie*, the native-born daughter of Italian immigrant parents in Frank Paci's 1982 novel, *Black Madonna*. The story deals with a widowed Italian immigrant mother, Assunta Barone, and her relationship with her Canadian-born children.

Assunta, despite being the focus of the book, remains largely an unknown character. What the reader observes about Assunta's personality is glimpsed through the voice of the intrusive narrator, her son Joey, or her daughter Marie. Her children regard her as peculiar and old-fashioned. The character is a first-generation Italian immigrant mail-order bride who is brought over and married to an Italian ex-patriot in Northern Ontario whom she barely knows. Assunta speaks only Italian and stays silent throughout the novel. She is a psychological puzzle and a mystery because the reader is never permitted inside her thoughts. Consequently, she remains an archetype of the exiled, silent and submissive female immigrant (Pivato, 1991).

Assunta's tendency to stereotype Canadians is indicated by her habit of referring to her daughter as "Canadese" in derogatory fashion when she does something Assunta disapproves of. This is meant as an insult. Marie, in turn, regards her mother's preoccupation for example, her emphasis on food, as too "Italian." Doing all she can to flee her dominating Italian mother's control and influence, Marie chooses a profession, life-style and spouse that are utterly the opposite of what would have been expected for her as an Italian-Canadian working-class young woman from Northern Ontario (Pivato, 1991).

At the opening of the book Marie has already left home to attend the University of Toronto. Unlike her brother, Joey, who still lives at home, Marie is rebellious. She rejects her mother's traditional expectations for an Italian daughter, to remain at home until marriage and to place marriage and motherhood above career: instead Marie intends to become a professor. Her major choices in life, her academic pursuits, her marriage to Richard, an English, Protestant Philosophy professor, her rejection of Catholicism, and even her



anorexia nervosa, are all motivated by her desire to escape from her ancestral roots, to be as “un-Italian” as possible (Pivato, 1991).

After her mother’s funeral, Marie has an epiphany when she discovers for the first time her mother’s old trousseau trunk that was brought over from Italy. Marie opens the box and in it, discovers some old photographs, her mother’s clothing, and other memorabilia. Marie puts on her dead mother’s black dress and, in the process, discovers her physical resemblance to her mother: the thin, severe Assunta, a young and wiry girl in a family photograph. Even her brother Joey is struck by his sister’s resemblance to their mother. And after their mother’s funeral, Joey and Marie receive a phone call from their mother’s sister, Aunt Pia, who invites them to take a trip to Italy (Pivato, 1991).

The novel ends with Marie’s trip to Italy, which suggests her need to come to terms with her Italian heritage and return to her roots. Marie is forced to see that all her attempts to distance herself from her Italian family have ironically led her only closer to that which she sought to escape. She repeats, in her relationship with her own child, the power games she resented that her mother played with her—especially over the issue of food. And Marie’s anorexia nervosa—her way of controlling something in the face of her mother’s food (the symbol of her domination)—ends up causing her to look just like that thin woman who was her mother. Marie becomes a substitute for her mother’s presence and it is Marie who walks the symbolic path of her mother’s life when she returns to Italy to visit long-lost relatives. Her decision to visit Italy indicates Marie’s intention to confront and to hopefully make peace with her mother’s ghost on its own territory. Paci’s message is clear: only by coming to terms with its origins and accepting them, will the new Italian-Canadian generation be able to find an identity which will allow it to feel that it really belongs. An identity that, however,

will be characterized by a full consciousness of its own roots and its own cultural background (Di Giovanni, 1990; Saccucci, 1990; Hutcheon, 1990; Pivato, 1985 and 1994).

### The Mamma Myth:

The presence of the Mother figure in Italian-Canadian literature is a powerful oral and social structure that dominates songs, stories, narratives, poems and many other literary works (Sciff-Zamaro, 1985). Pivato (1994: 167) offers an explanation for this: "While men have been physically present as good providers, they have been absent much of the time as companions and fathers. [This is] why the Italian family is so mother-centered."<sup>15</sup> And writer Mary Melfi comments: "From what I read on the subject, Italian culture still adheres to *motherolatry*, venerating mothers for their nurturing capacities. It sanctifies their role, giving them special status because of it, endowing them with a "clear sense of purpose" (1991: 8).

The strength of the Mamma Myth can be seen in the award-winning novel, Lives of Saints (1990), by Canadian-born writer Nino Ricci. The young mother in the story, Cristina, and her young son, Vittorio, have been left behind in their Italian village by the male head of household who had previously emigrated to Canada years before without them. Cristina has an affair with another man in his absence, becomes pregnant and has to leave the village when she becomes the object of town gossip. Her husband sponsors her so that she can emigrate to Ontario. On the ship crossing the Atlantic Cristina dies from complications while giving birth to Vittorio's half-sister. Ricci has been criticized for maintaining the

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<sup>15</sup> Pivato (1994) is speaking in reference to a situation that was all-too-common in Italy when massive waves of emigration abroad left many towns and village devoid of their menfolk. He poses the question, "What happened to the families back in Italy while the men were away?" One result was an increase in matriarchal power due to the absence of men, but this was short lived. While there was an increase in the influence women had, there was no real change in their status or in their social mobility. Italy remained a male dominated society. Some of this social change is examined by researcher Ann Cornelsen in her socio-anthropological study, *Women of the Shadows*. (See my bibliography). It is one of the few texts I have read that tackles this question effectively. This subject remains a much needed area of study.

patriarchal structure in this immigrant's story: Cristina must die because she has been unfaithful to her husband thus destroying the Mamma myth of the good, virtuous wife. The woman presented in the novel is not a model of perfection, but instead is seriously flawed (Di Giovanni, 1990; Pivato, 1994)

Mary Melfi venerates the Mother figure in her poem, Peace and Joy Free of Charge and likens her to something saintly:

My mother is superior to all the cathedrals/I saw on my last European trip./In comparison to my mother/the cathedral's Renaissance Madonnas are as sacred as/a parade of Hollywood movie stars at the Academy/Awards,/and as for their early Christian mosaics/my memory is able to compose better ones/of my mother sitting at the kitchen table(A Queen Is Holding A Mummified Cat, 1982: 55).

But the poet also subverts this tradition by poking fun at it and refusing to take it too seriously.

The gap between his front teeth reminds me of a doll I once owned. I threw it off my balcony one day after Mother had caught me drawing pictures of male genitals. She had made the sign of the cross and declared someone had given me *malocchio*—the evil eye. She attempted to remove the curse by using a primitive pagan-Christian ritual. She poured water into a bowl, added oil and then said a prayer. It had no effect. I continued drawing the obscene (Infertility Rites, 1991: 10-11).

In Nino Ricci's short story, "Fountain," the immigrant Italian mother figure is presented as belonging to an old fashioned, pre-industrial world.

Back home, Tony almost fell over his mother, who was scrubbing the kitchen floor on hands and knees—Tony never got over seeing this thick-set peasant woman in the gleaming chrome and Formica of their modern kitchen, and as he passed her now he had a sudden image of her stopping to shove twigs and branches under a blackened pot in a fireplace (The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Writing, 1998: 218).

Similarly, in Thunder Bay, writer Penny Petrone's world, her mother refuses to give up old world customs, believing instead in the wisdom of centuries old traditions.

Southern Italians tend to exaggerate their emotions. I can still recall Mamma wailing "*Sciullo mio*" (Woe is me) and tearing at her hair so hard... that she lost one of her treasured golden earrings. Later, when I was a young woman, I would rebuke Mamma for this emotional excess. But her reply was invariably a request to allow her to *spurgare* (give vent to her feeling). Ingrained in her was the Calabrese attitude, *Spurga o schiatta* (Relieve yourself or burst). Self restraint was harmful to the health. Even as an old lady, Mamma defended her emotional extravagance (*Breaking the Mould*, 1995: 62).

And Maria Mazzioti Gillan remembers her mother lovingly in her intensely compelling poem, *Ma, Who Told Me You Forgot To Cry*.

Soothsayer,/healer,/tale-teller,/there was nothing you could not do./In your basement kitchen,/with the cracked brown and yellow tiles,/the sink on metal legs,/the big iron stove with its pots simmering,/the old Kelvinator from 1950,/the metal kitchen table and plastic chairs,/I'd watch you roll out dough for *pastichelle*<sup>16</sup>/"Be quiet," you'd say,/and work at super speed (*Where I Come From: Selected and New Poems*, 1997: 102).

The narrator in Liliane Welch's<sup>17</sup> semi-autobiographical short story, "A Sense of Voice," reflects back on her Italian upbringing in Luxembourg. Her grandmother is remembered with fondness as having a powerful will and determined perseverance that enables her to run the family farm and raise four children without the benefit of a husband. She is anything but the stereotypical silent, submissive elderly woman and is instead characterized as a formidable pillar of strength despite her seemingly petite stature. This heroine is likened to the figure of the ancient Great Earth Mother, mythic in proportions, and not represented as a downtrodden and destitute peasant worker so commonly found in stories of war-torn Europe.

<sup>16</sup> A small-shaped pasta, similar in appearance to a seashell.

<sup>17</sup> Liliane Welch lives and teaches in New Brunswick, but was born in Europe. She was raised by an Italian mother whose paternal last name was Healy (Golini, 1990: 133).

My grandmother's ancestral world was measured by a solitary interaction with the earth. She had earned her freedom of spirit, sober resistance and grave nobility through hard agricultural labours. Equal to any man, in her fields she had given the ground an occasion to manifest its benevolence through the work of her hands. With a vigilant attention, an expert will, she had worked with impulsive farm animals. With deliberate gestures, she had cared for her vines in all seasons, cutting, cleaning and dressing them with an art legated to her by the Romans who had already worked her vineyards at the dawn of historic times. Looking at the slight, small woman one would have never detected the powerful will behind the benevolent eyes shining from the unpretentious face. The same determined perseverance that governed her farm and raised four kids without a husband, stood up to my father when he trespassed on her domain to woo my mother (*Pillars of Lace*, 1998: 82-84).

Similarly, in Mary Melfi's *Infertility Rites* (1991) the benefit of Old World naturopathy medicine takes precedence over the advent of New World wonder drugs for Canadian-born Nina DiFiore.

When I was a child and I was sick she made such a fuss over me, always ready with her homemade chicken soup. She knew all about natural antibiotics in chicken meat long before the American Medical Association discovered them. Nonna Lucia: an excellent remedy for colds and other ailments (p.147).

The protagonist Fabrizio Notta in Antonio D'Alfonso's novel reveres his grandmother's old world wisdom and knowledge, which he admits can only come from experience. In his estimation, she is a truly wonderful person whom he misses terribly after she dies.

You are dressed in black, a black woolen sweater over your shoulders and a black silk foulard over your white hair. You make your way to *La Chiesa Della Madonna della Consolata*<sup>18</sup>. I notice how thin your strong body that once worked those steep hills of Guglionesi<sup>19</sup> has become. How did you ever manage to shovel the snow that gathered in the sloped driveway of the house on 19<sup>th</sup> Avenue. . . Father is starting to speak more and more like you, Nonna. He boasts about how intelligent you were in coming up with all those sayings when, coming back home at midnight after a long, tiresome day at work, he would sit at the table with you. You always waited for him before going off to bed (*Fabrizio's Passion*, 1995: 166-223).

<sup>18</sup> The Church of the Consoling Madonna.

<sup>19</sup> This is the Italian region where the author's parents originally come from.

Fiorella de Luca Calce critically evaluates the condition of the grieving grandmother/widow who is left alone to fend by herself in Italy in her short story, A Mimosa In Winter. The sixteen year old grandson Mario has left his ancestral home to forge a new life for himself but returns to attend the funeral of his much beloved grandfather. What he encounters is a woman who is a shadow of her former self:

Entering, I turn to stand between the two folding doors of the kitchen. I open them. She is there, huddled on a wooden bench by the fireplace. The black dress and her crudely knitted shawl draped across her shoulders seems to make her shrink in size. Her hands, knotted with age, lie clasped on her lap as if in silent prayer. The flames cast shadows across her worn and weary face, deepening the lines that resemble intricate cobwebs. She is staring into the fire, eyes unfocused, remembering perhaps for one last time (The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Writing, 1998: 87).

Certain segments of the Italian-Canadian community are more inclined to valorize patriarchal notions of femininity and masculinity but some Italian-Canadian women writers have used contrast as a literary device to subvert the images associated with the Mamma Myth by scripting characters into their works that refute the dominant ideologies of the wife/mother/caregiver role (Tuzi, 1997).

Fiorella De Luca Calce turns the image of "the good mother," one who is virtuous and chaste, upon its head in her 1996 novel, Vinnie and Me. The author explores the family dynamic with all its tensions in the Italian-Canadian community through the Andretti family. The narrator recounts the troubled relationship between her best friend Vinnie, and his mother:

Vinnie's mother was not around very much, still isn't. I never met Vinnie's natural father. All I know is he left before Vinnie was born. Vinnie and his mother are like oil and water. She has a lot of male companions. They often crash out at the house, sometimes for weeks at a time. This drives Vinnie crazy. He says she does not know how to pick her friends (p.11).

The image of “the fallen mother”, once an object of scorn and contempt, and a figure rarely found in Italian-Canadian literature, is conveyed by the nameless child narrator in hushed tones in Carole David’s short story, *Impala*:

I learned of the baby’s existence after Connie died. Angelina was thirty years old in April of 1945. It’s strange to think the old woman sitting opposite me was once an unwed mother. Madly in love with a man who refused to recognize his son. She got married the following year to Franco, a friend of the family and who had courted her for years. As time passed, she gradually managed to make Franco believe she loved him (*Pillars of Ice*, 1998: 230).

Often what is missing in the literature are humorous characters and situations but some of the writers highlighted use sarcasm as a tool to frame their subjects as more rounded and realistic individuals. The Italian mother who throws convention to the wind by refusing to behave conservatively is portrayed evocatively in Rachel Guido de Vries’ poem, “On Alabama Ave., Patterson, 1954”:

When Mamma’s five sisters came over/she was happy. They talked dirty/in Calabrian and laughed out loud. They/smacked each other on the back or/grabbed hands, smoked cigars and/ate the whole time, coffee cake, macaroni,/meatballs, biscotti, and fruit. Little/apricots sweet and delicate and yellow,/and tossed the smooth brown pits/on a blue plate, where they clattered/like dice (*How To Sing To A Dago*, 1996: 16).

Similarly, the mother figure in Delia De Santis’ short story, “The Ache Within.” is criticized by her husband for her suggestive style of dress and her lack of proper decorum. She will not bow down to his authority:

Mamma always sat on the bottom step because it was easier for her to cover her legs with her tight skirt. Sometimes my father reproached her for wearing such tight skirts. She never got mad at him, but always put him in his place with a few words. “I might come from a poor country,” she told him, “but not from one that has never seen style” (Pivato, 1998: 186).

Family values are important in the psychological makeup of Maria Mazzioti Gillan who shows her audience that she owes much to her parents in her poem, "Public School No. 18 Patterson, New Jersey":

I am proud of my mother,/dressed all in black,/proud of my father/with his  
broken tongue,/proud of the laughter/and noise of our house/Remember me,  
Ladies,/the silent one?/I have found my voice/and my rage will blow /your  
house down (*Where I Come From*, 1997: 13).

In contrast, in Micheal Mirolla's short story, "Giulio Visits a Friend," the "Black Mother" figure is so incongruous with the values of the Canadian-born son, his attitude toward her is irreverent and dismissive: "A figure draped from head-to-toe in black—his friend's mother—flits by, all hunched over. She turns towards him for a moment, charcoal-eyed, unrecognizable and unrecognizing—and then vanishes into one of the side rooms" (*The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Writing*, 1998: 157).

In sum, the desire of the immigrant parents to preserve Old World culture is often at odds and in conflict with the attitudes and lifestyles of the New World culture. Second, and now third-generation native-born Italian-Canadian women have had to grow up in this dual environment so it is not by accident that the recurrent themes of duality and alienation are present in much of the literature written by this generation of women. Italian-Canadian women writing between the 1950s and the 1970s demonstrate that acculturation is a process that involves perhaps far too much sacrifice. The literature of the generation writing in the 1980s and 1990s, by contrast, is more feminist in its orientation and addresses a broader range of women's issues. This is due, in part, to the awareness that stems from the integration of the two cultures—the examination of each and the acceptance and rejection of certain components of both cultures (Donati Gunn, 1990; Golini, 1998).



Edwards (1990) criticizes the manner in which the second-generation writer condescends to the first generation in this literature. She maintains that these first immigrants are not any less complex or intelligent than their post-secondary educated children, yet much of the fiction written by the second generation has treated the first-generation immigrants as stereotypes in one way or another. She believes the present-day generation has a responsibility to portray its predecessors as products of societal and cultural forces, and yet still as individuals. Their lived experiences deserve literary representation as complex, not static, characters.

### 3.4 IMAGES OF WORKING-CLASS IMMIGRANT WOMEN

Italian women are characterized in Italian-Canadian fiction primarily as immigrants, wives, and mothers, but less often as paid workers. There is a notable absence of Italian immigrant female domestic characters in this literature. The critic, writer, and professor of Italian-Canadian literature, Joseph Pivato, offers an explanation for women workers' absence in the literature. According to Pivato, the protagonists, and the life patterns in the literary works of Italian-Canadian writers, follow the early models of the migrant (*mad* male) workers:

It often seems that the Italian-Canadian ethnic identity is a masculine one that leaves little room for the feminine factor. It is a history that has its roots in the all-male work camp, the all-male construction site, ...Italian immigrant women have been a function and an extension of the male world with no voice of their own (Pivato, 1986; 1994: 169).

The invisibility of women worker characters in the fiction reflects a sexist bias and is puzzling given the centrality of paid work in the lives in Post-War Italian immigrant working-class women who came to North America seeking personal and material gains. This thematic absence is also troubling considering the statistics on Italian immigrant women's

labour force participation rates in Canada (See Chapter One). The condition of immigrant worker and mother receives particular focus in the works of some Italian-Canadian writers because they focus so intensely on how Italian immigrant women were exploited (Pivato, 1986; Perin, 1992; Sarlo-Hayes, 1997), but there were very few examples of these texts that I could cite for this study.

Caterina Edwards explores the role of the immigrant domestic worker and housewife in her short story, "Prima Vera" (cited in Minni, 1989). Maria is a newly arrived immigrant bride married by proxy in Italy to a man she barely knows. She lives in a house in Edmonton with her working-class husband and several Italian "peasani"<sup>20</sup> boarders. The boarders' rent money helps Maria and her husband pay the mortgage on their new house. She is expected to cook for five men but she is unable to because she simply does not possess the skills. One of her boarders declares, in exasperation, "And what feasts we dreamt of when Cesare [Maria's husband] told us you were coming. Such banquets. We thought you were in servizio"<sup>21</sup>, to which Maria counters, "I was [indignantly] but I never cooked. I was the child's nursemaid. I was in service to the Count and Countess Cicogna. I certainly wasn't expected to cook" (p.134). I found this passage interesting because it questions the dominant assumptions about domestic's work-related tasks from an Italian male perspective. It is ironic that the boarders' incorrect assumptions that a "proper" Italian domestic woman is one who should perform cooking duties also reflect the North American bias that domestic workers are ideally suited to certain jobs.

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<sup>20</sup> Companion or (C)O-villager

<sup>21</sup> Domestic service in Italy

Immigrant Italian women's responses to paid labour can be found in the writings of Marco Micone (Sarlo-Hayes, 1997). In his plays, Voiceless People and Addolorata (1991), the two main female figures are mothers working full-time in factories doing piece-work sewing. Both of his characters have been worn down physically and mentally after years of enduring the same repetitive cycle of paid work and unpaid work. In Scene Thirteen of Voiceless People, Anna reminds her disgruntled husband Antonio she is exhausted because, "When I'm not working to pay off this house, I'm working at cleaning it" (p.76). In Micone's second play, the main female character, Addolorata, is equally frustrated with her unsympathetic husband Giovanni who forced her to seek paid work against her will because their family needed the extra income. She argues with him vehemently stating, "I've been stuck to my sewing machine for the past nine years. I feel like I've rotted away and I'm not even thirty. Not even thirty, Giovanni" (p.122). Micone's characters are not voiceless. Anna and Addolorata are aware of the fact that their paid and unpaid labours have little value in their family's estimation, and they refuse to remain silent about it. They bitterly complain to their husbands and children that they don't feel appreciated by them, but their voices fall on deaf ears. On the job site, both women choose to remain silent about confronting unfair bosses who give them more piece work than they can physically handle, while refusing to give them a pay raise. As a consequence, they resign themselves to their fate, a fate they believe they are destined to live out forever exploited as women and as workers.

In Anna Camilleri's short story, "Red Dress," the central character, Vierra, is a 34 year old married mother of two who works full-time shifts in a Toronto factory "pick[ing] out defective chocolates on an assembly line that moved too fast" (Curaggia, 1998: 254). She explains her need to work at a job that she hates by stating: "Well, I'm not a fool. I know I'm

spending the best years of my life in a *stinking* factory, but at least my kids'll be safe. What other choices do I have?" (p.254). Vierra goes through the motions at work every day like an automaton. Arriving just in the nick of time to start her shift, she routinely checks in her purse at the factory security gate, goes straight to her place on the line, and commences working without ever looking up. Preferring to remain distant and aloof, she never bothers to socialize with her co-workers in the company cafeteria. Vierra's attitude towards her bosses is to feel nothing but contempt for them: "As far as she was concerned, her supervisors could kiss her sweet Italian ass" (p.254). She feels trapped in her factory job—"It was like being sentenced to twenty-five to life" but rationalizes her situation by stating "It paid better than most other shitty jobs" (p.254). Camilleri is commenting on the sacrifices that first-generation immigrant parents made for their children in this story. Vierra's love and concern for her children's future gives her the incentive she needs to carry on working at a job she loathes. However, like the women workers in Micone's two plays, Vierra is characterized as a passive victim with no sense of human agency. Instead of voicing her complaints outwardly, she seethes inwardly and remains angry and bitter. In her opinion, she is forced by her obligations as a mother and a wife to suppress her true emotions surrounding her factory job. Camilleri's descriptive language offers some insights into how the central character feels about her working life. Words like "stinking", "ass" and "shitty" are significant because they are used to convey images that are disgusting and unpleasant. That Vierra has no aspirations for getting a out of the factory to find a better job because in her estimation, all the jobs she ever worked at were "shitty", is telling. Vierra does not place any value on her working life because it gives her no sense of purpose; consequently, the

only satisfaction she receives at the end of the working day, is a decent pay check and the knowledge that she is securing a better future for her children.

In contrast to Camelleri's character Vierra, the resiliency of immigrant Italian women worker when confronted with New World difficulties is manifested in Rachel Guido de Vries' poem "Toothache" in her second book of poetry, How To Sing To A Dago (1996:17):

When Pop was in jail, Mamma/swept and swept the stairs, ate/sardines with raw onions, and/rose at five each morning/to open the store, put out/the newspapers, fry eggs/and Taylor ham, restock/the candy and gum. She/kept answering the bookie's phone and ran messages to Pop/each night in his cell.

The central character in this poem is isolated and alone because her husband is incarcerated, and she is left to run the family business by herself. However, hard work is the impetus the Mother figure uses in this example to forget her personal troubles. Unfortunately, examples of women workers' agency in Italian-Canadian fiction are rare.

In sum, Italian women workers' experiences are largely left unexplored in the fiction or their experiences are misrepresented. When Italian immigrant women appear as paid workers in the literature, they are generally portrayed as downtrodden characters who are passive victims of social constraints they can never hope to rise above. Although the material and psychological condition of these women worker's lives is examined critically in the literature (most notably in the playwright Marco Micone's works), the question of individual agency is never broached. The fiction never explores the possibility that paid work might be considered an essential element in shaping an Italian immigrant woman's sense of identity. This finding necessitated the need for me to explore more fully immigrant Italian women

workers' experiences through first-person interviews. In Chapter Four, Italian immigrant domestics' voices largely absent from much of the fiction are given expression.

### 3.5 SUMMARY

Italian-Canadian literature has evolved from the initial "migrant" stage of its inception in the 1950s, where the fictitious character was scripted as an uprooted and displaced Italian immigrant (largely male, but sometimes female), to a literature that reflects the ethnic experiences of the succeeding generations living in the 1980s and 1990s (Minni, 1989). Fictional works by the first generation of immigrants tend to describe and recreate the process of immigration and settlement through the everyday life of their characters (Tuzi, 1997). This finding in no way suggests that the literary texts produced by the second generation of writers has forgotten or dismissed the importance of these themes in their works. Events such as immigration, displacement, settlement, and adjustment provide story lines, settings, characterizations, patterns of imagery, symbolism, and themes for the second generation's literature (Tuzi, 1997). This explains the prominence of absent family members, marital relations between parents, working mothers' daily realities, and nostalgia for the world left behind in the second generation's fiction, but the way in which my generation reinterprets the first generation's immigrant history is significant (Tuzi, 1997). The texts written by the second generation of Italian-Canadian immigrants are recreated in a specific historical and social context. My generation brings to the discussion our experiences, our stories, and our voices, which are different and sometimes in conflict with the views of the first generation. The theme of intergenerational discord is ever present in the current literature because the views of my generation are shaped by events which have not affected the first generation (for example, attending a post-secondary Canadian school). Conversely,

the lives of the first generation were shaped by historical and cultural processes that the second generation cannot easily relate to (war, emigration, and so on). These "extra textual events" influence the perceptions of each generation and impact on the way the lives of each generation are socially constructed in the fiction (Tuzi, 1997: 28).

The contribution Italian-Canadian writing makes to the scholarship on Italian immigrant women is that the relationship(s) between gender and ethnicity and how it influences the lives of these women are important issues that are explored in the fiction. In addition, the literary value of women's writing cannot be underestimated (De Franceschi, 1998). The difference in emphasis between female and male Italian-Canadian writers (though certainly not all male writers are oblivious to the issue of gender) indicates that there is a connection between the fictional construction of gender and the way that gender is socially and culturally constructed (Tuzi, 1977; De Franceschi, 1998). The traditional role associated with the Italian woman is that of wife and mother, caregiver, and keeper of the culture. I believe this accounts for the near invisibility of women worker characters in much of the second generation's texts. When immigrant Italian women workers are present, writers acknowledge the sacrifices many immigrant mothers have made to pave the way for generations to come. Accounts of physically arduous paid and unpaid work, menial and low paying jobs, workplace exploitation, and unsympathetic husbands are dealt with sensitively; however, explorations into this area offer a one-sided view. Italian immigrant women's emotional reactions to job hardships are recounted but nowhere in the fiction can I find examples of *what* actions the fictional characters took to improve their working lives. If historical and social phenomena are linked to the ways Italian immigrant women's lives are recreated in the fiction, then the texts I have cited have not thoroughly analyzed first-generation women's responses to paid

labour. In the next chapter, I introduce the Italian immigrant domestic workers of this study to the reader and uncover and outline the major findings from my interviews.



## Chapter 4

### THE KITCHEN TABLE TALKS: ITALIAN IMMIGRANT WOMEN WORKERS SPEAK

*Aching back and swollen legs,/ Low pay and long working days,/ Believe me, I deserved them all./ I'm only an immigrant after all./ Scene 12, Addolorata, by Marco Micone.*

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The data on which this chapter is based are drawn from a series of taped interviews held in the greater metropolitan Toronto area from the Summer of 1997 to the Winter of 1997. During the interview sessions, each female participant was asked to share her work experiences with paid domestic/household labour. This chapter adds to the scant but growing body of social scientific literature which examines the lives of Italian immigrant women in Canada. This literature recognizes that female migrants' experiences, as immigrants, labourers, and as women, are different from those of male migrants (Brettell & Simon, 1986). In-depth interviews that let women speak in their own words about their own lives, gave me the opportunity to link the personal history of each interviewee to the wider social history of which they were a part (Sturino, 1980; Glenn, 1986).

The chapter is divided into several sections. The first section analyzes the push-pull factors which compelled the participants to leave their homeland and settle in Canada. It reviews their family and working lives (both paid and unpaid) in Italy. The next section chronicles the interviewees' lives upon settling in Canada. It outlines their paid work histories, child care and family responsibilities, and discusses factors which influenced the participants' decisions to begin working in domestic service. The structure of domestic service is the topic of section 4.4, and it is followed by a discussion of work-related coping

strategies, which uncovers how the women workers of this study negotiated working relations between themselves and their employers. Section 4.5 explains how the women workers made meaning out of their working lives and it attempts to get to the heart of the research question. The final section deals with health issues and other topics that could affect the lives of these domestic workers in the future.

#### **4.2 LIFE BEFORE IMMIGRATING TO CANADA**

According to American researchers Alba (1985) cited in sociologist Clifford Jansen's (1988) study, Italians in a Multicultural Canada, and Gan's 1962 work cited in Del Negro's Looking Through My Mother's Eyes (1997), the major social classes in Italy are made up of four groups rigidly separated by a social hierarchy. They are as follows:

1. the gentry or upper class (Galantuomini), including the nobility, other large landowners, the professionals (doctors, lawyers, pharmacists and teachers) and the clergy. These persons were distinguished by the fact that they did not earn their living through manual labour.
2. the artisans (Artigiani), were mainly occupied in skilled crafts, small businesses and some service occupations. Both of the above groups listed had obtained a certain degree of formal education.
3. the peasants (Contadini) who owned or leased tiny plots of land. This group depended on the land for subsistence. In some instances, land ownership made these people self-sufficient, but a majority of the contadini rented and worked a parcel of land owned by the upper classes.
4. the day or casual labourers (Giornalieri) who each day looked for work on the estates and were rarely employed more than a third of the year. This group did not own land. When

the day workers were not employed in agricultural jobs, they might be involved in road-building, private construction or other public works.<sup>22</sup>

All of my participants were the daughters of *contadini* or *artigiani* who originated from small-to-mid-scale rural areas of Italy where many of them had been raised on working farms in farming communities<sup>23</sup> or in single-industry townships. Homesteads were typically agrarian, and the family was the main economic unit: all members of the family when present, women and children included, contributed their labours to the family income. Mrs. Q described the communal living arrangements of the property where she was raised:

It was designed so that ten families would live side by side in their houses. We were all related to one another by birth, so we all knew how to rotate our responsibilities. You see, in those days in Italy, your neighbours would help you do your farm work for a couple of days, and, in turn, you would help them with their farm work for a few days. The land was terraced and each community of ten houses worked one terrace. We had only 3000 people in our village, and we did not have enough tools or manpower to go around (my translation).

Five exceptions must be noted: Mrs. G and Mrs. Z were raised as children by extended family members who earned their living as semi-professionals. Mrs. D, Mrs. L, and Mrs. J were the children of *artigiani* who worked in the trades. When asked, interviewees described themselves as being from poor or working-class backgrounds.

Family size ranged from that of Mrs. G., who is an only child, to that of Mrs. D who came from a family of thirteen children. Two of the participants were orphaned as children, while some of the women lost one parent to death at a young age. All of the interviewees lived in some type of extended family arrangement. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins

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<sup>22</sup> While the northern regions of Italy were relatively better off economically than their southern counterparts, Jansen (1988) identified similar social rankings.

<sup>23</sup> Lacovetta (1993: 9) denotes, "Typically, [peasants] ... resided in *agro-towns* (*paesi*) perched on a hilltop or nestled into a mountainside."

were a constant presence in each interviewee's childhood. Each woman had a conservative Catholic upbringing and all had attended Sunday mass regularly with their families.

Several of the women in my study recalled how male members of their families in Italy had traveled all over the globe in search of jobs, making intermittent trips home to be reunited with kin. Stories of "lost fathers", absent brothers, cousins and uncles were a common thread running through much of the interview data. Women recalled how female household members were left alone to run family cottage industries and farms during periods of family dislocation. Mrs. H recounts a time in her childhood when:

... [m]y father was in Belgium. . . . In the mine yes, you know, to make some money. I mean to send to my mother to buy food for us. [He came home to visit] maybe once a year, at Christmas.

And Mrs. K told me, "My father was already living and working in the United States [when she was growing up]. I didn't know my father well. I can only remember him from photographs."

Most of my participants were accustomed to a life of physical labour, starting right from childhood, that included jobs such as tending to livestock, planting and picking crops (especially at harvest time), carrying produce to the market, drawing water from a well, cutting and threshing wheat/hay by hand, baby sitting other siblings, caring for sick relatives, and helping out with the domestic/household chores. Mrs. I explains her daily childhood routine on the farm where she grew up:

We used to get up at six o'clock in the morning [and] take the sheep to be fed in the field. Back home there used to be a bell that used to ring at eight o'clock. So, you come home, you get changed, put the sheep in another stall, and go to school. And the same story was in the afternoon coming home. So, that was our life then.

Similarly, Mrs. H recounted the constant struggles the female members of her family had to endure:

[My mother] worked like a horse. [She] wash all the clothes outside. By hand. Even in the winter. With the snow. I mean that water was so cold. I mean you had to wash the clothes, the sheets, everything in the cold. ..Everybody had their own things to do, you know. Nobody could help you. I mean you had to do it by yourself. I am the oldest one in the family, so I had to help my mother to do everything because my two brothers at the time, they were smaller. . . Actually, we used to be sisters, my mother and me because we have to do this, we have to do that, you know?

### Wartime stories

I discovered in my interview data that family dislocation was a major consequence of the war in Italy. The participants discussed how kin were uprooted. Men folk (mostly young brothers) were away fighting while parents and siblings were left behind to contend with the daily realities of life during this period of tremendous social upheaval:

The war was very bad. Four of my brothers were soldiers and had to go to war. My mother was always worried that they might not come back alive. Finally, we were reunited as a family after the war (Mrs. B).

I was just a little girl during the war but I remember some of the men in my family had to go to war and they were away from home for years. My parents were very frightened during the war because the Germans used to rob the Italian farms of their food. The Anti-fascists were worse than the Germans! They would rob us of everything and kill the livestock. We had to sleep with our animals to ensure they weren't stolen. We couldn't have lights on at night because we'd be targeted by the bombs so we blacked out our windows and slept with flashlights in our beds. When you went out in the night to use the outhouse, you had to walk very quietly and you couldn't use any light. My aunt had to hide her wedding trousseau linens. We hid our wood from the Germans in the wine vats. We also had mice to contend with too that got into everything. They would eat our bread. It was frightening to think that the Anti-fascists would kill you. I remember one morning, I heard them boasting they had killed someone and a man from our town was found murdered in the street. My husband, because he is older, remembers men from his town hiding in the mountains and if you dare help them by bringing them food, you would get into serious trouble and be labeled as a traitor. Those men hiding in the mountains had to eat the leaves off of the trees. That's the way it was then (Mrs. Q—my translation).

My husband remembers more because he was older but I remember going back, some men came and took my father in the night time. They took him far away in the mountains because all the men hid there when they are supposed to start the fighting, you know? My father stays two days there, but he knows the road so that night when everybody was asleep, my father open the door so slow and started to come home. There was lots and lots of snow and he had to walk for two days and one night. After that week, everybody [all the men hiding in the hills] died because of a fight. I remember because my father talked all the time in the night when we stayed close to the fire in the winter time. My father reminded me (Mrs. U).

Two of the participants had brothers who were captured and put in German P.O.W camps. Their stories were retold fifty years after they took place but time had not completely lessened the impact of these painful memories:

My brother went into the army. He was seventeen. I did not know where he was. For two or three months I never heard. I did not know if he was alive or dead. Finally, one day, I get a letter he was on the first line and he was wounded. And then several months after, one day, we just got surprised he came home. He came back. He escaped the concentration camp, him together with another soldier, they escaped. They escaped, they ran, they ran to the train and they escaped the concentration camp. And then we lost the war and we had to flee the fascists then. The fascists were looking for my brother. They hid the people who were the same age, we have to hide him. The people like my brother, same thing, hide. The grocer used to bring the food. We would be in trouble [if the authorities discovered we were aiding the prisoners]. We did that for a month or so and then the Germans, they tore away the bridge. They took over and they stayed for a month or two, then they went away (Mrs. V).

My brothers were prisoners in the war so we was worried every day. We were thinking about the brothers, you know? The American planes, they used to pass near to us. They used to come our way up the coast after the Germans. They used to come up with the battalion to re-fuel and then so many times, with the bombs, they went off. I was scared by the bombs, by the men in the planes when they used to go to Germany (Mrs. D).

Many of the interviewees remembered how women and children were evacuated from certain areas and relocated when the bombing posed a serious threat to their safety:

I was fifteen and we had to be evacuated. During the war, we were so happy we went out of the city because every night, there was bombing there. We could not stay in the city so we just went out of the city with the train because it was impossible to stay there every night (Mrs. G).

The war was bad. When I was working in Milano, my grandfather called me back home because the city was being bombed. He found me another job as a domestic not far from home, for a family who had one child. This was a family of wine merchants and when they re-settled in Bologna, they took me with them. At that time, I was only 18 years old. The bombs were falling there too, so we all had to go to a hideout on a farm for shelter. I had to deliver wood to the Germans when I was working for this family. I also had to dig trenches as part of my job (Mrs. K).

Well, I heard stories all right. Some of them I forgot it, some of the things stick to your mind. Okay, I was born in 1938 and this war was going on until 1945 but . . . I remember when they called for evacuation in my town. The Germans were taking over. I will never forget my mom had a double bed and there was seven of us sleeping in it. All my relatives like that but actually, my family never went through anything really bad, you know? My father was released because he had flat feet but I remember when the Germans blew up the next door neighbour's house (Mrs. I).

As the economy suffered in Italy in the aftermath of the war, one woman recalled shortages of food and clothing and the presence of allied soldiers in her town.

They could not find clothing for that time. Food, we had to buy the food with the stamps and if you did not have enough, you had the welfare like here. It was like that for awhile. Americans gave you that. Yes, they used to help us a lot. After they won the war, they came around and said, who ever wanted this, have it. The clothing, they give it to you, you know, all the used clothing during the war. I only went a couple of times for food and for clothing [because] I was not that bad, you know? They were around for a couple of weeks and that is it (Mrs. V).

In some cases, the interviewees were quite young when World War II was taking place and some of them had vague recollections of that time period; however, they were able to recount the war-time stories of older husbands or relatives:

My life wasn't affected by the war because I grew up in Italy after it was over but my mother told me the war was terrible for her (Mrs. P).

I do not remember anything because I was too young but my mother, she talked about the war. She told me they had a hard time and no food and they had to go into the shelters because otherwise, the bombs came and then they were going to kill you, you know? They used to go there day and night (Mrs. H).

My mom tells us every time, "we suffer so much, we have nothing to eat." That time was bad for everybody (Mrs. L).



I was just born that time but my husband remembers the war because he was in it. He was there. He was eleven years old and he told me they were fighting. At any time, a fight would break out on the street. I mean a gun fight. I am not talking about a fist fight. So, you go for cover. You see, in the North, [where her husband originates from] the fighting was between the Italians, between the anti-fascists and the fascists. Actually, they had the German's defending them and they [the Italians] used to work for them. Working for war things like digging trenches and things like that and the Germans used to pay them. The anti-fascists did not like that. They were always complaining so it was a fight all the time (Mrs. J).

### **Paid work experience in Italy:**

Several of the women I interviewed had worked as domestic/household workers in Italy (my mother, Mrs. D; Mrs. K; Mrs. U; Mrs. Z; and Mrs. B): all of them in live-in situations. Mrs. K had held several positions as a live-in domestic from the age of sixteen and is the only woman I interviewed who, along with her husband, was jointly employed as a couple by a wealthy Italian family who owned a villa in Florence: she as a cook and he as a butler. Their young daughter also lived with them in the servants' quarters. Although the opportunity presented itself to live and work together as a family, Mrs. K was terribly unhappy with her situation. She explains:

My husband was afraid of our boss, the *padrone*<sup>21</sup> was a really bad man. The donna of the house, his wife, wanted me to lock our daughter in her room all the time. All my other employers were good to me except this one. We went back to my husband's family because our employers were so bad. They didn't pay us enough money: they mismanaged their own funds, and they had lots of other servants too.

Mrs. K's story supports Arat-Koc's (1989: 39) thesis that once the domestic/household worker enters into the realm of the employer's home, she/he is absorbed into their domain and is therefore expected to serve the whims of their boss at the expense of her/his own families' needs.

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<sup>21</sup> "Boss" or "Person-in-charge" in Italian.

Mrs. Z had worked as a chambermaid in a resort in Italy for one summer after she got married. She got free room and board while employed at the hotel and her husband used to take the bus on overnight visits to see her every two weeks. When I questioned her about how she coped as a newlywed bride, being separated from her husband for lengths at a time, she offered this matter-of-fact explanation: "Well, we needed the money." Mrs. Z clearly understood that the personal sacrifices she undertook contributed to her family's economic security.

There were some job perks unique to this position that Mrs. Z could take advantage of. As the resort hotel where she worked was located in a popular tourist destination spot, she could enjoy time off spent lying on the beach. Some of the more generous travelers would occasionally leave her a tip after she made up their rooms, and she was allotted a decent food stipend to use in the hotel's main kitchen. She remembers, "The food was free. They said, this is this. What do you like to eat? It does not matter. Whatever I like I could eat. Yes, they pay me pretty good in there."

Mrs. U, who came from a poor family of seven, left home at the age of twelve after obtaining the equivalent of a grade three education, to go to work for a rich Italian family of four as a housekeeper eight kilometers away from her town. She stayed in this position for approximately six years. Describing her working day as, "Start[ing] in the morning about six, but when I finished I do not know. Six, twelve, one, you know, the time in the morning, not the night." She was paid once a month, part of her wages being in food stamps, which she collected and put in a book.

Despite her young age, Mrs. U was solely responsible for maintaining a sixteen room house. When I asked her to outline her domestic duties she said, "I clean the house, I do the

laundry, ironing, vacuuming, and then I cook. I knew everything. . . because my mother taught and put it inside here [pointing to her head]." At special occasions like Christmas and Easter, a woman from one of the local farms was hired on a live-out basis to help Mrs. U with her extra duties. She maintains, "But most of it I do myself. . . and no extra money."

Separated from her own family, Mrs. U was only allowed occasional visits home:

After about six months or one year, I go home and stay. You know, go sometimes on a Saturday and stay Sunday. And Monday I am supposed to go back, but sometimes I do not want to go home because after I am supposed to go back there. Sometimes when I go home, I have the bag and I supposed to go back, I have a fever. . . all the time. Sometimes I prefer that I do not want to go. I feel better when my mother comes [but] when momma go home, I started crying in front of everybody so I feel bad. . . I was kind of depressed staying there, I think.

According to De Grazia (1992: 191) Mrs. U's working conditions were not uncommon:

Families recruited their help from rural backgrounds, not infrequently from the villages where the *signori* had family estates or went on holidays. On their return home, Roman families brought back girls as young as eleven or twelve from the. . . .Abruzzi, Milanese families from the Veneto<sup>23</sup> or the Lombard lake country. Wages, varying from thirty to sixty lire a month, were arranged with the girls' fathers or through the mediation of the village priest or local notable. For these paltry sums, together with occasional gifts of cast-offs, the girls worked interminably.

Yet despite Mrs. U's slave-like treatment, she was not completely powerless. She recalls an incident when the padrona of the house wanted her to wear a clean white uniform while preparing the family meals. As Mrs. U had only one apron in her possession, which she had to pay for out of her own wages, she refused to soil its appearance while cooking, "Sometimes she wanted [me] to use [it] when I cooked, but when I cooked I made a fight. I said no. Sometimes yes, I made fights."

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<sup>23</sup> Please see my map for locations.

Mrs. U also used silence as a means of getting her message across to her employers when she was angry: "Sometimes, you know, one day, two day, I do not talk. Sometimes work was too much. . . I cannot do it. I want this. I want this. I want this. Okay, but one at a time, you know? I want too, but it is too much."

And on one occasion Mrs. U decided she had had enough. "One time I quit. After, I stayed at home for a week." But the padrone asked her return to work and she stayed on with this family for another two years until she met her future husband and left their employ. She made a conscious decision to leave her position:

Because I am tired. And one day I say, you know, it is eighteen. It is no more a child. I am tired. I am going home to stay with my sister and my mother and my father. Sorry, mad enough, I go home. I am going to do this no more so I am going to go home because I am tired.

Mrs. D had a positive experience working as a domestic/child-care giver for a diplomat's family in Switzerland for close to eight years. Her situation was entirely different from that of Mrs. U because she did not leave her family's home until she was twenty five years old. She had a contractual agreement with her bosses, and her sole duties involved taking care of the family's only child from the time he was six months old. These factors made it much harder for her employers to take advantage of her.

Mrs. D fondly recalls that period of work in her life as: "Very pleasant. Yes, in Switzerland it was very, very pleasant. [Her bosses] were very good, very warm. [Their residence] was like a castle." Unfortunately for Mrs. D, the padrone was posted to a new location and she unwillingly relinquished her post: "They wanted to take me to Czechoslovakia because they moved. . . they wanted to take me with them. . . but that time in there it was Communists." Mrs. D left their employ on good terms and her bosses arranged

the necessary immigration papers so that she could come to Canada under contract to another family.

Mrs. B went to work as a domestic for an Italian family in Genoa who owned a spaghetti factory when she was twenty years old. An aunt living in Genoa arranged the position for her. Her duties involved taking care of two children and "light" housekeeping—dusting the furniture, cooking the daily meals, and washing the dishes. Although the padrona she worked for was "very nice" she could be demanding: "After I dusted the pictures on the wall, she would come by and tell me if they weren't lined up properly and when I dusted the legs on the dining room chairs, they too had to be placed just so." But Mrs. B could find emotional succor within a circle of friends also working as domestics in the same location. They would meet in one of the city parks for a chat while taking their employees' children out for a walk. She also had the opportunity to visit her aunt on her days off which helped to bridge the gap between home and work.

The work histories from Italy reveal that domestic service was just one of several jobs the women had held. The participants also worked as farm hands, salespersons, factory employees, grocery store clerks/general helper, and chambermaids. A common practice at the time involved a family sending their daughter to a tailor or a seamstress as an apprentice in the hopes that she would eventually learn a trade. Several of the women (Mrs. L, Mrs. Q, and Mrs. I) had learned sewing skills that they used to do "piece work" either in their employer's shop or at home.

I used to sew on my sewing machine and my dad used to put the light bulb really down close to the table because you could not see nothing. I used to work there for the whole night and in the morning I would bring them back. The person would try them on and then the next day, I would finish. In two nights I used to make a pair of pants for five hundred lira (Mrs. I).

Similarly, Mrs. L. told me that she did her apprenticeship.

[in] a big house and this guy, I remember they bring so many pair of pants, like a hundred pair of pants from work. So one lady she would sew, like ten pair of pants in one day. Another girl, it was five pair of pants. Depends on, you know, how good you are, you know? They used to pay me but then, not very much. It was not too much.

All of the participants, with two exceptions, were accustomed to performing some type of paid labour outside of the home, prior to moving to Canada.

### **Leaving Home:**

The women's reasons for immigrating were numerous but they all listed these factors which compelled them in the direction of North America: a lack of steadily available work in Italy and the need to be reunited with family who had already made the transition to Canadian life. Mrs. G remembers:

So my husband he sat up and he said, well, now is the time to decide to do something different. So we went down to immigration, there was all kinds of work, so we came here to Canada.

And Mrs. P maintains that, "In those days, you followed your husband. Maybe now it's different. Things may have changed in Italy. The women are more free."

Mrs. K's ordeal with her Italian employer, who mistreated her husband and small child when she was working as a domestic in his villa, prompted her decision to leave Italy. "When we returned to our family's home. . . that's when we made plans to immigrate to Canada, because we were sick of the hardships."

Mrs. H mistakenly thought Canada was a land of golden opportunity, where she would live a life of ease and comfort.

I said, okay, I will go to Canada, you know? I am going to be a queen. . . I do not need to work any more. . . So, I was so enthusiastic to come here to Canada. I said, at least I do not have to work any more. . . I thought it was like that.

Similarly, Mrs. J thought Canada was a land where, "Money was growing on a tree over here. Surely that is what the people [Italians ex-patriots who had previously immigrated] were saying."

When asked why most participants left Italy to migrate elsewhere, their answers were telling. Future prospects looked bleak. Mrs. H summarizes: "[In Italy], . . . nothing was there. Nothing. . . No hope, no future." Immigrating to another country to secure brighter economic prospects was a common-place scenario for many Italians. As Mrs. I said:

Italy was really, has always been poor. Like with jobs. . . And all those young guys, they were going all over like Switzerland, Germany, Belgium, Buenos Aires, and Canada, States, whatever they could find. . . Because there was nothing to do in Italy then, so that is why all those guys [emigrated].

Unemployment was not the only facet of Italian life my participants had to contend with.

Mrs. Q relates:

You have to understand that we lived on a non-mechanized farm. We had enough to feed ourselves but if we were hit with storms, drought, pests, or crop failure, we would have nothing to eat. We had mice too, that got into everything. They would eat what little bread we had left (my translation).

Many of the women agreed they were simply sick of the daily physical toll of farm life and longed for something better. Mrs. U stated, "You know, in Italy it is poor soil. You want to go to Canada, the family jump because you make money."

Similarly, the strain of having too many mouths to feed compelled some of the women to leave their homes. When I asked Mrs. L what factors led her to migrate to Canada she answered, ". . . because my mom had so many kids. We could do without [but] we came in this country to do more. You know, everybody who is working gets more money and live better."

Two of the women had arrived in Canada as teenagers with their parents and siblings, others as young brides anxious to join their husbands and new extended families, and others, like my mother, as single women to fulfill job-related contractual agreements. In some cases, interviewees were able to sponsor family members left behind in Italy to come to Canada once they were financially established. These women, who had migrated to Canada after World War II, had permanently settled in the metropolitan Toronto area. The concentrated efforts of their labours paid off: all of the women I interviewed lived in their own homes, and many had done so for more than twenty or thirty years.

#### **4.3 A NEW LIFE IN CANADA**

With three exceptions (Mrs. G, Mrs. V, and Mrs. D), the women moved to the Toronto area when they first arrived in Canada from Italy. Most participants lived in or about the uptown Little Italy of Toronto that borders St. Clair Avenue and most of the newly-arrived interviewees lived temporarily with friends or kin in some type of shared housing arrangement before permanently settling in their own homes.

#### **Paid Work Histories**

The women used informal methods to find their first paid jobs in Toronto with the help of kin, friends, and fellow paesani, and almost all of them began working immediately upon arriving in Canada. A typical work pattern reveals that periods of unemployment coincided with pregnancy and child birth, maternity leave, illness, factory closures and layoffs. Domestic service was only one of several jobs in the service sector that the participants had held during their working lives in Canada. Many of the women had also baby-sat, taken in boarders, did homework (piece-work sewing), worked as waitresses, grocery store clerks, letter sorters for Canada Post, and did cafeteria and catering work.



Work experience for the participants as domestic/household workers ranged from only a few months to over thirty years. Several of the participants had already retired when the interviews took place. Live-out day work was preferable to a live-in residential placement, especially once the participant married and had children. Only one of the participants I interviewed continues to live and work on site at her employer's home on the outskirts of Toronto, but her situation is unique. Mrs. Z lives with her family on a rather large estate in a house that belongs to her boss, separate from the main house some distance from it.

Most of the women indicated that a friend or a female relative had assisted them in obtaining paid employment as a domestic. One woman relied on the services of a cleaning agency to obtain clients. One interviewee reported placing an ad on a board at a local supermarket while another responded to a job offer in the classified listings of a Toronto newspaper. Other women began working as domestics by replacing friends or relatives who left the occupation. And Mrs. Z told me that she apprenticed with her aunt for a period of time in an employer's home until she felt comfortable enough to take on her own clients.

#### **Choosing Domestic Work: Factory Work Versus Paid Domestic/Household Labour**

With three exceptions, all of the participants had found paid employment in factories for a period of time at various stages throughout their working lives. In some cases, factory work was the first paid job they acquired when they first settled in Toronto. Some of the women stated that factory work can be personally satisfying when you are able to strike up a friendship with your coworkers. A shared sense of camaraderie on the job can act as a buffer for a new immigrant against any feelings of alienation and loneliness they might be feeling on and off the work site. Mrs. U remembered:

When I go in the factory, in the morning, they set you up with a lady. You make a friend and talk. I remember when I started in the factory, I would go there ten minutes before and talk a little bit, you know? And when you have the lunch, you stay all together.

Mrs. L found a job piecing and sewing coats together in Toronto's garment district on Spadina Avenue almost immediately after emigrating to Canada. Most of her coworkers at the time were women and she voiced similar feelings about her working environment, "I had lots of fun because, you know, when you work with a good friend, it is nice." Similarly, Mrs. I, who began working on a sewing machine in a sporting goods manufacturing plant only two weeks after she first arrived in Canada told me, "Like one of the bosses, she was Italian. They were pretty nice, but at the time they were nice because Italian people were the only ones who wanted to work these kind of jobs."

Some of the interviewees stated that there were some drawbacks to working in a location with coworkers who communicated in the same European language. For example, Mrs. I blamed her inability to master the English language fully, despite all her years spent in Canada, on the fact that it was not a requirement on the factory job site; instructions could be passed to her in Italian by a bilingual forewoman. The other negative aspect was that while it was nice to work in the company of other women, some of the interviewees stated that their co-workers were prone to gossip and "butting in to" your private affairs (Mrs. B).

Long hours, inflexible bosses, unhealthy work sites and speed-ups were contributing factors that led some of the participants in the direction of private domestic/household work. Mrs. U was in Canada for two months when she landed her first paid job as an assembly line worker in a children's toy manufacturing plant. She told me that her eight hour day was spent standing on her feet being subjected to toxic fumes:

It is very, very dirty. Yes, yes, very dirty. I was supposed to work on the line. It is supposed to move but you are supposed to move the hand fast. Fast because the line [is moving]. All the little toys as a gun, you know, it is not finished. . . The other lady is to push it back and assemble the little car and take the car and put the other side and take the other pieces and put it in the bottom. . . Sometimes it goes too fast. The little things go down the other hand. It in the night there is no time to wash the hands because it takes half an hour, so take the towels and put it in the hand, then put the ticket in the bus because the hand is really dirty.

Mrs. H encountered a similar scenario in the steel plant where she worked three months after immigrating to Canada. Her job-related duties involved cutting pieces of steel which would eventually be made into screws, "A lot of pollution in there. All day stood up and worked on that machine.[It was] dangerous and hard, a hard job."

Mrs. J found a job doing piece work clothing repairs at a dry cleaning plant one week after she arrived in Canada. Piece work is production driven and labour-intensive. The sewer must make so many repairs by the end of the working day, and production can be held up at any time if one worker fails to move fast enough. This system can subject the worker to speed-ups and pressure from bosses and other co-workers:

The only problem I had was when I working in the piece work. And the next lady, she used to work a lot, a lot, a lot. And I used to relax, go to the bathroom and, you know, every ten minutes and she did not like that because she always wanted to work. Basically, because she was doing the work, and the work that she was doing, she would pass on. And they say, what the hell, and they say you do not give me enough.

Mrs. L once worked as a sewer in a sporting goods manufacturing company for three years but found she could not continue because, "I get sick. I get sick because I do not know, maybe I was too depressed to think about something that was wrong." And no wonder! Mrs. L described her work day to me:

I had three machines, I remember. I had one machine that had two needle to do the double stitch and another machine for the bottom. Well, when you finished one job, after you finished one bundle, you start to do this bunch. You finish and go to that. I worked. I worked.

After an extended period of rest on Worker's Compensation, Mrs. L got a placement as a live-out domestic and never returned to factory work again.

Although factory work did offer the possibility of overtime on occasion which would result in a bigger take-home pay check, domestic/household service offered the potential for each participant to individually work out a time schedule that satisfied both employer and employee. Many of the women with small children indicated that this was a major decision-making factor that led them to choose domestic/housework over paid factory work.

### **Child Care and Family Needs**

All of the interviewees worked a "double day" to some degree as a result of having to perform certain forms of paid and unpaid labour. When the women came home from their domestic job-related duties, they faced a myriad of tasks at home including cooking the family meal, preparing children for the next school day, washing the dishes, mending clothes, shopping, cleaning, laundry, and many other unfinished household chores. The participants themselves internalized patriarchal notions about the gendered division of labour with regard to housework as indicated by these statements:

You have to do what your husband says. . . You had first to cook. Feed me too. Prepare the lunch. And after, sit down a few minutes and after, fall asleep. Wash everything you know you are supposed to do. Do the laundry and clean the room. . . That one day, you know, is gone fast That is my problem. That is my responsibility in my home. I take care of my house. I take care of my kids. I take care of my housework. My husband goes to work in the morning and come back in the night. . . when he come home, my husband says, "I am tired." He does not remember the floors there. The men take the lunch and mommy still goes to work. Does nothing around the house (Mrs. U).

My husband never helped me because the Italian men do not have to do [house]work. What do I have to do, my husband, that is what he wants (Mrs. L).

Because after we married, then it is different. You have to take care of the family, the kids and the husband (Mrs. D).

And Mrs. H gave me a small glimpse into the world she came home to every day:

Clean the house. Wash the diapers. I mean, make the supper in the night for the husband, everything. My husband, he had a bad temper too because he liked to drink. And then sometimes he was drunk.

Outwardly and in front of their husbands, the immigrant Italian participants may have quietly acquiesced to this established routine, but on tape and in front of this interviewer, the women complained that they had very little leisure time for themselves. Mrs. I expressed her criticism with a twinge of sarcasm. When I asked her if her husband was a "traditional, old-fashioned Italian male" she countered with this reply, "Yes, and I wish that tradition he would take with him. No, he never had been the type to help me out." The only participant in this study married to a native-born Canadian was Mrs. V. She once came home at the end of a working day to find her husband doing some of the household laundry. Unnerved by this sight, she admonished him, "I said, why do you do that? You know, I am getting used to that. My mother used to always do it."

Given these circumstances, the flexible, shorter hours coinciding with domestic/household labour provided a practical solution to the nagging and on-going problem of child care accessibility as a viable alternative to other forms of paid work. Mrs. Q maintained she chose domestic work over factory work partially in response to her husband's wishes and her children's needs.

I wanted to be home when my children arrived from school, and I wanted my weekends off. My husband didn't want me working late hours. He wanted me home for the kids. He wanted supper on the table when he came home from work, and he felt I should be the one to take care of all this. With four children and one of them ill, you cannot take time off from factory work (My translation).

Mrs. L found her present position through a neighbour who informed her that the Catholic priest at a local church's rectory was in need of a domestic/household worker to clean his living quarters. Initially, she had planned to remain in his employ only on a temporary basis, not knowing if she would enjoy working in this occupation. Her work record is impressive: fourteen years later and she is still on the job. When I questioned Mrs. L as to why she decided to stay in the same situation all this time, she responded that the job suited her child care needs. She can arrive for work in the morning whenever she wants and set her own work hours.

I decided to work here [because] when I finish work here in the day time till three o'clock, two o'clock, it depends. When I finish, I go home, I pick up my daughter at my sister's house.

Mrs. U began her working day at nine o'clock and finished around 3:30 or 4:00 p.m. These hours gave her the opportunity to drop her children off at school. When she worked at her factory jobs, she had to start at eight o'clock and did not finish until five o'clock. Domestic/household service also gave her the opportunity to exercise some choice over what client she would or would not work for.

The women I would say, if you live too far, I will not come because in the morning I bring my children to school and when I am finished, I go take my children from the school. I had the car and that helped me so much because sometimes, when I finished work, I would go take my children to school. I have lots of work at home. If you go in the factory, you are supposed to go every day, all week, you know, but I cannot go and I have lots of work at home. I go out at 8:30 [and] at 3:30, I am home.

When I asked Mrs. I what time she started working in the morning on any given job site, she told me:

[w]ell, it would be nine, but we had the two little ones. One to bring to my mom, the other one to school, so I would go there at nine thirty. Then I finished maybe three, three thirty. The only reason I liked it because I could not do anything else because my kids, you know.

Mrs. H found the task of cleaning a ten room boarding house physically daunting but she stayed at this job for five years, "Because I had a baby. If I stayed in the factory, I had to go so early. I had more chance, I mean, to prepare the baby and everything."

My mother was able to take me to work with her while cleaning a client's home. She explained to me, "When I started 1962, first time, it was when you were ten months old. I took you with me when you were sleeping, on the bus. I put diapers to change you and everything." When I asked her why her boss did not object to this arrangement, she stated, "No, no, they asked me, oh bring because they had their own kids and played in bed. They had cribs. Because you know, it was hard for me to find a baby sitter for you."

Domestic service offered some possibility of control in arranging the length of the work day and illustrates that job flexibility was one of the major advantages of the occupation over other types of work. By setting their own work schedule, the women could take their children to school in the morning and be there in the afternoon to greet the child when they returned home. This was less possible with live-in service where there is no clear boundary between work and leisure time. In some cases, live-in workers are expected to be "on call" 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Arat Koc, 1989).

Domestic service also provided a solution for working women with preschool age children who had to rely on the child minding services of female relatives or paid baby sitters. Mrs. I's quote illustrates how important these kinship networks were:

See, the reason I took that job was because I used to drop off my daughter with my mom, at the same time, my other daughter to school. Then I would go to work. At three o'clock I finished work. I would pick up the one at school. I would pick up the one at my mom's and then we went home.

All of the women interviewed defined themselves first as wives and mothers and their career choices reflected this identification. Many of the respondents claimed they "just wanted to help my family out" by earning extra income, and domestic service/household labour was one option, whether undertaken temporarily for a period of time or full-time, that stretched the family budget.

#### **Lack of Proper Language Skills**

All of the women I interviewed maintained that they spoke little or virtually no English when they first arrived on Canadian shores. They all said that their inability to communicate properly in English was a major stumbling block to assimilating to their new life in Canada. Mrs. P, the youngest participant, was the only woman who had the opportunity to take ESL classes at night when she first arrived in Toronto. Although English classes were provided for immigrant Italian women by the Toronto Board of Education and by various volunteer organizations in the fifties and sixties, Iacoverta (1987: 9) opines, "Their attendance was, at best, irregular due to pressing duties at home."

Mrs. I articulates her reasons for choosing domestic work. Her response indicates a clear understanding of her motives for undertaking paid household work:



The time when we came, that was only survival things that we did. It was not really much, especially for somebody who did not speak. I did not speak English. I did not know schooling. I did not know, like, the language, was the main thing. So, we did not know, of course, you go and clean the house because who is there to talk, right?

Mrs. Z found her first domestic/household placement just a few months after arriving in Canada when her aunt asked her to accompany her to a job site. Mrs. Z worked side-by-side with her aunt and used her to interpret her employer's instructions when a problem arose:

I said, all right I want to come. And no English. Zia, [Aunt] I said, they just asked me something. What did they say? I did not understand. She said, do not worry. Just you do your work. So I start and they say to my aunt, tell her to do this, this and this. So my aunt said, you have got to do this. You have got to clean this. You have got to clean everything, you know? So I said, okay.

These experiences attest to the fact that the inability to fully communicate in the host language was a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it was not a prerequisite to being hired as a domestic or a factory worker, on the other hand, it limited the women's choices. They could move from one type of employment to another in the service sector, but they could not move up the ladder into the higher paying, professional job market.

### **Wages**

The subject of wages came up several times during the course of my interviews but to ask each participant how much money they earned on an hourly basis would have constituted a social *faux pas* on my part which I would not have felt comfortable doing. In some cases, the interviewees stated that private domestic/household service paid higher wages than factory work. All of the participants agreed, however, that the amount of money earned on a daily basis did not have a direct bearing on job satisfaction. What the women found important was the fact that they were paid for their labour in cash at the beginning or end of the working day. All of the participants had the same agreement with their employers: wages

would be left in an envelope, usually somewhere on the family dining room table. This arrangement indicated a relationship of trust between employee and employer.<sup>26</sup> None of the participants filed an income tax report for the wages they made thereby increasing their disposable income. This would have been less possible with other types of paid employment such as factory work.

### **Finding a Job**

Domestic/Household service is one of the few occupations where one can always find employment. The interviewees never lacked for clients. Several of the interviewees (Mrs. B, Mrs. K, and Mrs. D) pointed out that "At that time, many European women were doing housecleaning. You did not find Canadians doing that, sometimes, [but] very seldom" (Mrs. V).

Mrs. V and Mrs. B would strike up a conversation with other domestics while riding Toronto's public transit system. Women would network with one another and pass on potential employer's names.

They used to do that. If they know you, they feel you are honest and everything they say, so, if you want to go, this is a nice lady. This is my friend, so that is how you would do it. They would tell me too. The other ones would say, if you want to go, she is too fussy. She watches what you are doing. She always, you know? So I did not go. There was no competition for those jobs then (Mrs. V).

This informal network also acted as a gate-keeping system whereby domestic workers would warn one another about "bad" bosses who complained and demanded too much from their employees. Although the women worked in isolation (in most cases), solidarity with other women would help the domestics gain a sense of support.

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<sup>26</sup> This two-sided relationship of trust between the homeowner and the domestic/household worker extended to the entrance keys to the job site as well. The employer would cut a copy of the master key and give it to the women to keep. They would then be able to enter their client's home to start their working day when the occupant was away at business.

Based on the recommendation of their current employers, the interviewees could easily find new clients who wanted their homes cleaned. Once a participant had established an agreeable working relationship with one employer, that person would refer the domestic/household worker to a friend or an acquaintance who might then, in turn, become another potential boss. Mrs. I stated, "And one person calls me and then she gave my name to another friend and another friend and before you know, I had the whole week full." Word-of-mouth took on special significance. As most of the hiring practices involved an informal arrangement between domestic and home owner, a verbal agreement was the only binding contract the worker could rely on.

At that time if you worked hard, you got many good references. I had a good reputation among my clients (Mrs. B).

When I go first time with a lady, when I am finished I say, do you like my job? She says, oh yes, it is very nice. So, you have some friends because I need work, you know. And sometimes she send us to some extra friend, or some other old lady (Mrs. U).

Just as the women used each other's experiences to separate "good" employers from difficult ones, home owners too could use informal "policing" methods to black list unsuitable workers.

In summary, the Italian immigrant women's career options were limited in part by the Canadian job market, lack of education and English language skills, and familial and child care needs. One condition that led these women to choose domestic service over other occupations are similar to those found among native-born Canadian women: the upholding of a traditional patriarchal belief system that places the responsibility for child care and domestic duties squarely on the shoulders of wives and mothers. Ostensibly, domestic/household labour appears to be a low-paying, low-status job ghetto frequented by

immigrant women; however, my findings suggest that factory work did not automatically guarantee better working conditions or higher wages; moreover, factory employees could be subjected to health risks, constant scrutiny, and exhausting work hours. Domestic workers effectively became self-employed agents with some control over their own work schedules and the organization of their work.

#### **4.4 THE STRUCTURE OF DOMESTIC WORK**

The National Occupational Classification defines “Light Duty Cleaners” as workers who “clean hotels, motels, schools and private residences” (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1992: 274). In the course of my interviews, I discovered that my participants had laboured as domestics in a variety of situations that encompassed commercial office buildings (the work day commencing sometime in the early evening); hotel suites, apartment buildings, boarding homes, a parish priest’s rectory and private residential homes. Mrs. K had also worked for 15 years as a “heavy-duty cleaner” for an insurance company clearing and cleaning debris away from fire ravaged homes.

Some of the women also performed child-care functions while they were cleaning for clients in private houses, and here the lines of distinction begin to blur as The National Occupational Classification manual states that “Baby-sitters, Nannies and Parent’s Helpers assist parent with child-care and household duties—meal preparation, laundry, washing dishes, running errands and other routine housekeeping duties” (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1992: 258). Whether a participant agreed to take on baby-sitting jobs as part of their daily roster was a matter of personal choice, and this was not a common-place scenario in most of the work histories as some of the interviewees’ clients also employed maids or other live-in personnel. All but one of the interviewees (Mrs. J), preferred cleaning

work over child care explaining that the responsibility of caring for someone else's children made them too nervous.

Their work weeks ranged from a one to a five-day week. Most of the women worked six or seven hour days; others worked half days. Some of the women moved from working in multi-level, large-scale homes to only working in smaller residences such as bungalows, apartments, and condominiums as they got older. The smaller dwellings meant that some interviewees found they could clean two apartments in one day. Several of the participants, Mrs. K, Mrs. B, Mrs. V, Mrs. G, and Mrs. D had already retired when the interviews took place. With few exceptions, a common work schedule involved juggling several different employers within one week. Mrs. V explains how this arrangement worked, "They would come back and they would pay me and then I would see next week. Sometimes I used to go two to three times a week to the same lady, sometime once, it depends." Only one woman, Mrs. P, had ever worked as a cleaner solely for one employer. All of the women worked mostly for Jewish families; some had worked for Italian families.

### **Daily Duties and Routines**

The National Occupational Classification manual lists a core group of duties for "Light Duty Cleaners" as involving:

sweeping, mopping, washing, waxing and polishing of floors; dusting; vacuuming of carpets, area rugs, draperies and upholstered furniture, making beds; changing sheets; cleaning, disinfecting and polishing of kitchen and bathroom fixtures and appliances; and washing walls, ceilings, and windows (Employment and Immigration Canada, 1992).

My data reveals that most of the participants performed not only these cleaning duties but "other" tasks as well, not listed under the "Occupational Descriptions" segment. Some of the extra jobs mentioned by the women in this study were: laundry, ironing, watering plants,

baby-sitting for short periods of times, preparing and storing meals in advance, baking, grocery shopping, nursing care of elderly employers (bathing, grooming, and companionship), chauffeuring, wrapping Christmas gifts, collecting mail, calling in necessary personnel to make household repairs, polishing silverware and crystal, organizing kitchen cupboards, taking telephone messages, rearranging furniture, gardening, serving food and drinks on special occasions, washing dishes, loading the dishwasher, and sewing. In some cases, these duties were assigned to the women by the employer; in other cases these tasks were undertaken on the domestic worker's own initiative.

Basic "work" tasks were performed every time the domestic entered a job site, while the more time-consuming and physically arduous tasks, for example, scrubbing the refrigerator and stove, were done on a bi-weekly or monthly rotating schedule. Most of the women had established a set routine for completing their tasks as described by Mrs. U:

In the mornings I would go there. First thing, I open the door. I knock on the door and say, hello, nobody home. And then I close the door. After I come up here and go inside. I change my clothes [and] put the clothes in the purse.<sup>27</sup> And then, to start cleaning the room. Go downstairs, take the pail, take the rag, take the soap and then I start. Start to wash the base board with the soap and the water. And then I start to vacuum. I would take out the machine and vacuum. Vacuum machine I start and keep on going. [Then] I dusted every room. And the cleaning of the mirror. And the washroom. Make every nice. And go to the other one room. I know every room. Ten minutes, a quarter, a half an hour. . . When I go there, I open the house. I do my job. I finish and close the house and I come home.

<sup>27</sup> All of the participants, save one, indicated that this was a common practice. Each woman would wear comfortable, old clothing on the job site and change into her regular street clothes before going home. The only participant in this study who regularly wore a uniform, was Mrs. P who was working in hotel as a chambermaid at the time of this study. Her uniform was provided by her employer. She also was the only participant to regularly punch a time clock on the job.

I do everything. I cook in the morning. After I finish cooking, I have to go do the beds upstairs. . . I have to clean the washroom. When I go on Wednesday, I have to cook for Thursday. And Friday [when] I go, I cook and I do it for the whole weekend because the kids go there and eat. I do soup. I make the pasta. I bake for her. I do so many things (Mrs. L).

Well, you have got to clean the bathroom. You have got to make the beds. You have got to clean the floor. Dust. When you are cleaning, you have got to clean all over, you know? Vacuum. To do the vacuuming, you have got to clean the curtains, so I clean the drapes. I clean the furniture. The laundry sometimes. She [the employer] would do it. She would do the laundry. I am cooking too if she is not available to do it. When she has a party, I cook. So I am cooking. I have got to cook. You have got to serve. Take the dishes. I have got to clean up and regardless, I am finished. And if she need me, sometimes she has got people for dinner during the week. . . if I am going there, on Saturday or Sunday, I am going there because they ask to be available for them (Mrs. Z).

### **Work Practices**

The women soon discovered at an early stage which routine worked best for them in getting tasks completed before the end of the working day. All of the participants demonstrated a high degree of mastery over their jobs. They knew exactly what equipment/appliances and cleaning products to utilize for maximum performance; how to work effectively at their own pace; and when to allocate lunch and coffee breaks for themselves. The responsibility to provide cleaning products and tools for the job usually fell on the employer, but in some cases the domestic worker brought her own vacuum to the client's home.

Work tasks were usually employer-defined at first until the domestic/household worker knew what she had to do. Once the women became proficient at their jobs, the client would then expect the domestic to repeat the same duties and produce the same level of cleaning she had previously demonstrated:

She said when I went there the first time and that is all. She explained everything the first time and that is all. No, they told me one time when you go there. After, you have to remember yourself. I mean, what to do in the house, you know? (Mrs. H).

No, no, no, no, they do not tell you. You just do it on your own. (Mrs. J).

No, she never said nothing to me. She said, you let me know what you are supposed to do. . . Because my friend had recommended [me] she already knew I worked six years in Italy [as a live-in domestic]. So when I work, she [the employer] do not say nothing. I know my job well and what I am supposed to do (Mrs. U).

No, they do not tell me nothing (Mrs. L).

When she [the employer] phoned me up, I went over. You know, I met her because first of all, I did not go in let's say, without knowing the person. She told me what she wanted done. Let's say, you know, wash the kitchen floor, wash the bathroom floor, dust, mop, whatever, and do not go downstairs because there is no need for it. Stuff like that. So you clean the bathroom and the tiles and the stuff so you know once that was done, it was done. Once you go once or twice, you know. Sometimes I would go there and she would say, look, forget about my bedrooms upstairs, today [I want you] to do the fridge. She would say, okay, if you do that you know, do not worry about my upstairs kind of thing. So this is what [I] would do. Another time she would say, I would like you to do the stove for me today (Mrs. I).

She knows that I am cleaning houses. She knows I know what I am doing. She said, so you know how to do. You do it. But she never said, do not clean here, or you do not clean there. She never said that (Mrs. Z).

Each woman's employee/client relationship was unique, but for the most part, the domestic was able to gradually obtain autonomy over the job process and this facet greatly improved working conditions. The domestic worker could, in theory, take charge of her work schedule and effectively become her own boss.

Working conditions with regards to pay rates, duties, vacations, sick leave, and breaks were negotiated in a semi-formal way and were almost always verbal contracts between the domestic and the employer:



I have an agreement with the women to work set days. It's a flexible arrangement for both me and the padrona in case one of us gets sick or wants to go on holiday (Mrs. Q, my translation).

You know, I can take two weeks, three weeks, you know. I say, just three weeks and I am not going there because I am going on holiday. They knew about it. Stay away until you need to stay. If I am sick, stay home if you are sick. Do not go there. Do not worry about the house because they know it will be clean anyway. There is no problem (Mrs. Z).

Negotiations between boss and worker could break down at this point when either person deviated from this arrangement. This situation will be discussed in another section.

### **Working Without Supervision**

One of the most positive aspects of domestic/household service that greatly enhances employee job satisfaction, is the ability to work without supervision. Most of the women interviewed said they preferred if the home owner was absent during their working day. The participants were able to gain a greater sense of autonomy over the labour process if they were left alone to get on with their day.

Oh yes, it's better. I can go at my own pace with no one looking over me (Mrs. Q, my translation).

Yes, it was okay. It was okay. You work alone. Nobody bothers you. You know what to do (Mrs. J).

You do anything you like. If you are feeling good, you work more. If you are not feeling good, you have to take a rest. (Mrs. D).

I like it because I never know. Nobody has to tell me you have to do this. You have to clean the window. You have to wash the curtains. Nobody tells me. I know when I have to wash the curtain, when I have to change the bed. Nobody tells me, I know myself (Mrs. L).

As professionals who were experts in their field, many interviewees felt their personal and professional integrity was at stake if the employer was constantly looking over their shoulder watching them while they were working. Mrs. V recalls how she voiced her objections in front of a boss when she found herself in this situation:

I said, lady, if you sit here and watch me, I will just pick up my clothes, my purse, and go home. I had to tell her.

When I asked her if this direct verbal confrontation proved effective she responded, "Oh yes. She left me alone."

The respondents also indicated that, at times, the employer's very presence was bothersome: employers could interrupt and slow down their work. Most of the women faced a full day's work when they entered a job site; therefore, time was of critical importance in getting all their work duties finished in a timely fashion.

Well, you know, she [the employer] was going out and then she was coming in. You know those type of people, they do not socialize too much with the workers, [besides] I had a lot to do, you know, and no time to do it. I had to do all those things on time (Mrs. G).

I work alone because when I go there. . . she knows myself. You know there is nobody home. That is better because I do my job in my way. When somebody is there inside the house, maybe sometimes you talk five minutes and sometimes you talk ten so by the time you start the work, you cannot finish (Mrs. U).

In some cases, there were times when the domestic would work side-by-side with the padrona of the house:

She was there but did not bother me. Ten o'clock in the morning, she started to cook in the kitchen. Then I started in the bedroom. So, in the afternoon, she would go to sleep and I would finish the living room, front room, and the kitchen (Mrs. L).

I feel like a boss in there because they depend on me. If she has to make a dinner party, she asks me, what do you want to cook? What do you think? What kind of meat do we have to eat? She did not show me that I am not allowed in here. You know, I am not embarrassed because maybe she watches me if I do not clean good. Really, I do not care because you know, you have a confidence with her. I do the same even if she is around. She knows in one day you cannot clean all the house, you cannot (Mrs. Z).

I used to go to do this lady's house. . . She had eleven kids from age ranging from two to fourteen. When I was in the house for lunch time, it was chaos and everything in the fridge because she used to lay out all the fancy stuff to make sandwiches, so the kids would help themselves to whatever they wanted. So you could imagine that fridge. You know, we would find stuff moldy that had been there for weeks, you know, shove it in, in a little container, you know? There was a pile of laundry everywhere. A pile of dirty clothes, you know? You did not know in the basement what it was. The house was a huge house. And was difficult, like. There was no way you could clean the whole house the way, you know, you are supposed to in one day. But whatever I saw to be done, of course, I knew she needed help right? So I used to help her out with as much as I could with everything. You know I, this is the way I am (Mrs. J).

Yes, she used to work with me. We worked together. The house was big. You know, you can not do everything. In that house, if that lady she hired a woman once a month, with all the work she had to do, it was not enough (Mrs. H).

Statements such as these serve to illustrate the fact that domestic/household labour is, and continues to be, a highly sex-segregated form of work, both paid and unpaid. Domestic chores are constructed as women's work and something that women are seen as naturally able to perform. As most of the respondents indicated, their husbands and sons would not do their share of the washing, ironing, and cleaning that needed to be done around the home, and I can only speculate that many of the female employers<sup>28</sup> faced a similar situation with regard to their husbands, hence their need to hire outside, professional help.

Mrs. I's story is illustrative of the fact that some of the participants in this study sympathized with the plight of their female employers. Remarks such as, "She was like a friend" (Mrs. J), or "We were like sisters" (Mrs. U and Mrs. Z) suggest a false sense of female solidarity, false because the domestic worker and the employer are separated by class, educational, cultural, and socio-economic differences. The women conceptualized themselves primarily as wives and mothers; therefore, they sometimes internalized, on some

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<sup>28</sup> I can only speculate because interviewing the participant's employers was never an intended part of this study.

level, a false sense of kinship with their employers based on gender. Though some of the immigrant women workers were able to psychologically separate themselves from their employers, Mrs. I and other respondents in this study saw themselves as "helping out" the female home owner rather than as a waged employee with full-fledged worker's rights. As a consequence, this sometimes made it possible for the mistress of the house to take advantage of the domestic.

I do not want to leave her at once because I am scared for the lady. She really needs me. She is a very big lady but she can do nothing. She is sick and she goes down the stair and she cannot breathe, you know? She has to sit down. [If something happens to her, it is my fault (Mrs. I.).

Oh no, she could not do it. She could not do it alone. She could not handle it. No, because she tells the people, 'that is my helper'. She is like a family (Mrs. Z).

And Mrs. V's love of children made her vulnerable to her employer's whims. She felt obligated to care for them, which left her in a situation ripe for exploitation.

She was nice but she took advantage of me. Six kids, she always leaved it to me. She wanted to go eat, she would go out. I had my work to do. I did what I had to do, baby sit and everything. Most of the time if the woman had kids, they would give them to me, you know, instead of getting a baby sitter. It was smart.

Domestic labour continues to be a physically arduous job despite advancements in cleaning technology and household appliances. Vacuuming carpets, dusting furniture, and cleaning kitchens and bathrooms is labour-intensive and exhausting. Many of the participants mentioned that modern inventions like no-wax kitchen and bathroom floors eliminated the need for them to wash floors on their hands and knees. Participants preferred using sponge mops and no-rinse liquid floor cleaners in place of hand scrubbing floors with brushes and pails of soapy water. These tools eased the physical burden on knees and lower backs to a degree, and could effectively shorten the amount of time the domestic spent on cleaning in their working day. However, the conditions of household labour still require

from the domestic worker a certain amount of physically taxing energy. Heavy cleaning, such as sweeping and washing floors, cleaning kitchen appliances (especially stoves and refrigerators), vacuuming, cleaning the bathroom, dusting, and tidying up, are physically demanding and time-consuming jobs. While changes in technology (time-saving cleaning products and tools) may have eased the amount of labour required to do some task-specific jobs, the fundamental physical nature of domestic service remains unchanged (Luxton, 1980).

#### **4.5 WORK-RELATED COPING STRATEGIES**

Feminist researchers have asserted that “the personal is political”; from this perspective it follows that every single person is, at one point in their lives, a political actor. Researchers have stated that even the most powerless and disenfranchised members of a society have always had some means at their disposal to “fight back” and resist their oppressors (Blumberg and West, 1990). Unlike in other occupations, domestic/household workers almost always work in isolation in private homes; this fact makes it difficult for them to form unions and other collective forms of organization. Therefore, the women workers in this study have had to rely more on individual work-related coping strategies to assert their rights (Bookman and Morgan, 1988).

#### **Working Relations Between the Domestic and the Employer**

All of the participants verbalized distinct ideas about the differences between women they considered to be “good bosses” and those they did not. “Bad” employers were characterized as those who were “being too picky”, “dirty”, “expecting me to do too much”, untrustworthy, or holding back promised wages. “Good bosses” were those who treated the domestic worker with respect, were trustworthy, honest, listened well, and appreciated the

efforts of their workers. In the interview stage, the respondents related their experiences to me about some of the conflicts and struggles they encountered throughout their working lives. Mrs. V told me about the following incident:

One lady would make me bend with a dish pan on my knees and clean out the dog shit she did not want to clean. I said, I did not come here to clean your dog shit. She did not like it and I did not go anymore.

And Mrs. E had a similar story.

These people. . . well, you know, they have a big house. Big stairs going up to the rooms, you know, and sometimes they would bug me. . . 'can you wash the bath tub because I have to take a bath?' they said to me but I mean it does not take long just to rinse it out, you know, and I said, okay, I will do it. I went there to clean and did it because I was there to clean, so I did that too [but] soon I was not going there any more.

These narratives illustrate the limits the domestics are willing to work under. The domestic/household workers set very clear boundaries about what they would tolerate with regards to cleaning. "Even me, if I go to a place that is dirty, I will not go. No, No, I do not go back" (Mrs. I). Mrs. V's refusal to clean her client's dog manure suggests that this task was above and beyond the boundaries of the duties she was expected to perform. She chose "direct confrontation" as a method to orally confront her employer and when the boss did not concede to her terms, Mrs. V left the woman's employ. Although Mrs. G did, in fact, finish the appointed task, and chose to remain silent about her displeasure, she eventually used "quitting" as a means to convey her refusal to work under these conditions.

One of the strengths of domestic service, according to the interviewees, was that undesirable employers could easily be replaced with better ones because, as they indicated, cleaning jobs were readily available. "Quitting" (or threats to quit) redresses the unequal power balance between boss and worker and is one of the most effective work-related

coping strategies. Mrs. L has to juggle her schedule around two part-time cleaning jobs at two different locations. She works as a housekeeper for a priest at a local church rectory. From there, she has to go to her job as a domestic/home care helper for a seventy-two year old client. She describes how she uses threats to deal with a senior citizen client who is becoming increasingly difficult to work for:

Sometimes she gets mad because she says, 'tell the priest to find another lady because I need more things to do.' I said, 'well, I have done my job and I go home.' Sometimes I get mad with [the employer] because she say, 'you have to clean the credenza, you do not make too much time. You have to stay more longer here.' And the daughter, she was mad. The daughter said, 'you have the cleaning lady. You have to ask the cleaning lady.' She does not treat me like family [and] I do all these things for her. Well, I am sorry. That is the way I am. I will not be treated like a slave because I know what I am doing for her. If you like to keep it this way, okay. If you do not, find somebody else. I tell her last week, I said, 'maybe Wednesday I do not come.'

I would be remiss if I did not mention that at no time were any of the respondents ever fired from a domestic service job. This finding suggests that the women were very much in control of who and when they would work for any particular employer.

The issue of trust was a major consideration in a domestic worker's decision to remain with any given employer. In order for the working arrangement to survive a measure of time, the concept of trust was dependent upon a reciprocal relationship where honesty between the two parties was a given and constancy was an implied character trait. Some instances where trust broke down between employer and domestic are illustrated here.

Mrs. H recounted a harrowing story. She once worked for an employer who suspected her of stealing an expensive piece of jewelry from her home. Rather than outwardly confronting her domestic worker, the padrona of the house asked the law to intervene.

Early in the Fall, the police man phoned here. 'Well,' he said, 'that lady, she says you stole a bracelet from her.' I said, 'what?' I said, 'I never stole anything from anybody. I have a couple of bracelets I bought in Italy I never wear.' I said, 'if you want to see it, I am going to show it to you.' I was so upset. They do that for the insurance. I did not even think that at the moment. They do that for the insurance.

Mrs. H sees herself as an upstanding and honest citizen. She was horrified to think that any employer would accuse her of taking something that did not belong to her. In this instance, the employer is not only questioning the work habits of her domestic, but her moral character as well, and this was a judgment call that Mrs. H would not allow. She "quit" her job with this homeowner and never went back but the memory of the incident still haunts her after all this time.

Mrs. V had a similar experience. She described an episode on a job site where her culpability in an accident was in question:

This woman [her employer], she had her mother living with her. Every morning I was here rushing between the baby sitter and hardly had time for breakfast. [The mother] always used to say to me, 'you had breakfast?' I would say, 'no I did not have time.' She would say, 'here is the toast. Go in the basement and eat it and do not show my daughter that I gave you toast.' This woman! Anyway, . . . one day she made me clean the basement. And in the basement was a little statue like this. I had an accident and I broke that. And what does the woman do? She did not pay me. She took all the money she owed me. She made me pay for the statue that broke. I had no money to go home. I had to walk from [her house]. She made me pay for it, so I had no money. I had no money for car fare because she took the money for what I earned that day to pay for the little statue that broke. She was so rich. Of course, I never went back.

Both the mother and Mrs. V were victims of this employer's tyranny, although to two somewhat different extents. The employer's mother showed sympathy for Mrs. V and, because of this, each woman was forced to enter into a secretive agreement to conceal the fact that the domestic was being given food that the homeowner obviously did not want her to have. When the employer's statue was broken, Mrs. V felt that the padrona should not



have demanded and extracted monetary retribution for the object. The exclamation, "She was so rich" reflects her resentment of the homeowner's socio-economic advantage and position, which Mrs. V could never easily identify with. Once again, "quitting" was used as a means to show that the domestic worker felt she was being treated unfairly and that she would not condone this type of behaviour any longer.

A typical consequence of the capitalist mode of production is that an employer will always try to extract the maximum amount of labour output from the worker usually while paying the absolute minimum of wages, and domestic service is not immune to this problem. All of the participants agreed that the most contentious issue between the employer and the worker centered around "speed ups"—each person had differing opinions concerning how many tasks should be completed in a certain time frame. Problems arose when these differences could not be reconciled:

There may be sometimes that I am in a hurry. Maybe I do one room and it is nice. The other maybe a little bit faster. Or sometimes they look in the back and say, 'oh, that is not good.' The next time I am going to make more mess, more cleaning. Sometimes I go in the bathroom and the taps all the time they do not shine, but you know, you do not have time (Mrs. L).

A few of the women preferred to negotiate in a diplomatic fashion, disagreements with their employers:

Some of them are, oh my God, some of them they were terrible. They come up behind you, I want this, do it. I want that. They never said, it is fine what ever you do. Well, I said, listen, every time I leave at three o'clock. I try to do my best. If I have time to do it, I will do it. If I do not have time, I will do it next time (Mrs. H).

Sometimes they want you to do more than you are physically able to so I tell them I can't, that I can only do so much. I explain this to them, that there is not enough time (Mrs. Q—my translation).

Thornton Dill (1988: 38) categorizes "Fighting Back" as a key tactic used by domestic workers to respond to an employer's attempt to infringe upon their rights. Mrs. U's story is an example of one woman worker's struggle to resist her boss' dictates.

One lady say, clean the chairs, clean the fridge, do this, do the oven, but there is not time. So, I had the rag in my hands. I said, 'who for?' I threw the rag on the floor. It is true. It is true. This lady so quiet. So she walked and left the room and sat down on the couch, so quiet. When I am finished, this lady is supposed to change the bed, not me. I started the laundry. So I folded the sheets and put on the back door with the sign to take and clean. When I am finished, I put the jacket. I said, 'Mrs. . . the laundry is on the back door, bye.' She is coming from my front, from the hall. She says, 'Wait. Maybe I pretend too much.' 'Yes,' I stood and said, so she hugged me and kiss me. Understand they do not live with us but they still give us trouble.

Mrs. U's physical response symbolically suggests she is "throwing the gauntlet on the ground" and taking her stand against what she considers to be an unreasonable work load. Although she finished her work-related tasks for the day, her refusal to "change the bed" by leaving it for the padrona, indicates her silent, but angry refusal to acknowledge the duty belonged to her. In essence, she is turning the tables on the employer and placing the responsibility for cleaning back in the employee's hands. Although both women came to some sort of awkward agreement, I perceive the homeowner's response (kissing and hugging) as controlling. By overstepping the physical bounds of her space, the padrona is preying on Mrs. U's emotions. This action functions to undermine the professional and psychologically distant relationship the domestic worker is striving to achieve, consequently opening up the possibility for her to be manipulated and exploited.

Mrs. D was sponsored by a diplomatic family to come to Canada as a live-in domestic in the mid-1950s. She found the working conditions under this sponsor's roof intolerable.

While still under contract, she left this position despite knowing that she might have to face legal recriminations.

The first family. . . I had a big fight one time and I left. This leaving not easy because I did not have permission. They wanted to wait until they found someone for them, but I wanted to go away and not live in their house.

Iacovetta (1996: 17) maintains that the Canadian government's attempt to force immigrant Italian women to comply with the dictates of the Domestic Scheme of 1951-52 failed, in part, because the women complained so much about their placements. Far from being passive or ignorant, the domestics left their employer's home at their own choosing and, in doing so, acted out their own personal strategies for securing better jobs.

It should be noted that many of the women in this study did not use "quitting" as a strategy to terminate their employment with "bad bosses" and replace them with "good bosses"; for these participants, quitting was a viable option but one used only as a last resort. Some of the interviewees preferred to remain silent about unsatisfactory work situations, despite any problems they may have encountered.

Well, because it is my nature. It is like this, you know. I do not like to say anything back. (Mrs. G).

[Laughing] I kept quiet and did nothing. I am not the type of person to answer back and speak up when I have a problem with my boss (Mrs. K).

Other women workers resigned themselves to staying in certain situations because they were reluctant to adjust to a new employer, different schedules, and the accompanying rhythms of work that went along with change.

I kept going because I already knew her and the place. It was three days a week and it was easy. Well, sometimes I would get used to it. I have seen so many other people do it (Mrs. V).

I am getting older. I do not think about it any more, this job (Mrs. L).

I do not like it because sometimes I am tired, especially sometimes my head. I have a pain in the leg sometimes, you know? But when I feel okay, I like. Sometimes when I go there I find something so I am mad, but after two weeks it is gone (Mrs. U).

I didn't like to change bosses, to start again and to get to know someone else all over again. No, I never changed my bosses, even the ones who were bad. I worked until I was 74-years-old part-time, but only cleaning the apartments because the big houses were too much for me. Even then I never told my ladies in the big houses I was still working because they would call the house and I could never say no to them. I told them instead I was staying home to take care of my grandchildren (Mrs. B).

Though it may seem highly unlikely, a few of the respondents claimed that they never had any occasion to disagree with their employers.

I did not, never, never, never, never had any problems with nobody. They never let me go. I always go back myself (Mrs. J).

Well, I never deal with the *padrone* of the house, only with the *padrona* [but] I don't fight with my boss. Why should I? We have to treat each other with respect (Mrs. Q—my translation).

My boss is very nice. I have no conflicts with her at all. I like working for her (Mrs. P).

I never had any trouble to work with them. No problems (Mrs. Z).

#### **4.6 MAKING MEANING OUT OF THEIR LIVES :The Stigma Associated with Domestic Work**

Unlike the participants in Glenn (1986), Dill (1994), or Romero's (1992) research, many (but not all) of the women in this study appeared to be immune to the low-status stigma attached to domestic service. Dill (1994) and Glenn (1986) found that membership in a particular ethnic community can act as an agent to offset the negative effects of working in low-status occupations. Similarly, my findings indicate that the participants in this study were able to use their association with the "Little Italy" communities of Toronto to counter the degrading social construction of domestic work. Many of the interviewees maintained that everyone they knew in their Italian social circle was also working in domestic service; since

everyone had the same type of job, the women could obtain professional and emotional succor from one another.

Well, a lot of people they do that, you know. There is a lot of people I know they do domestic work because not everybody can find a job you know, or some people, they like a job like that (Mrs. G).

Well, I think it's okay. All my friends do the same type of work (Mrs. Q—my translation).

All Italians, I guess they did that, most of the Italians (Mrs. V).

A lot of my friends they do the same job (Mrs. H).

A few of the respondents explained that working in Canada as a domestic/household worker was preferable to working in Italy. The egalitarian spirit that pervades much of the North American lifestyle ethic, in comparison to the rigid class hierarchy in Italian society, meant that what a person did to earn a living might not be equated with their personal character. Tilly et. al (1978: 46) opine: "Particularly to the eyes of an American, the very direct and personal application of differential patterns of behaviour and respect according to class is still very striking [in present-day Italy]."

In Italy, when you fill domestic work, you are considered not good, it was not good, but then I came here in Canada and discovered it is not like that. When I came here I found a difference. Everybody was pretty equal. There was a lot of people doing that. There were a lot of immigrants, you know, because they had small kids too (Mrs. V).

I do not want to work in Italy any more. I told you I hate working in Italy. I hate it. I enjoy it here in Canada. I feel free (Mrs. Z).

We work hard here but the ladies in Italy, they do not do too much. My sister-in-law in Italy, she does not do anything. The people are funny. I do not know. In here, it is different, the story over here. I like it here. I like it (Mrs. L).

The women in this study did not measure their sense of self-esteem and self-worth from the work they did. Their social identity was based on their rank in the family rather than their job position. For this generation of Italian women, the status attached to marriage and

motherhood overshadowed all other job-related roles by which they defined themselves. The women placed importance on their paid domestic work in terms of how much it contributed to the family's sustenance and they reinforced patriarchal definitions of the ideology of motherhood. Though the participants were able to exercise some choice over what they did, many of the immigrant women worked because of economic necessity.

It was just a job. It was an okay job. I just wanted to do this for my family so we could make some money and have a nice life (Mrs. K).

It is another job, of course. You do what you have to do. Whatever you find you do and that is that, I always say (Mrs. J).

It's a job like anything else (Mrs. Q—my translation).

What is the difference how you make your money? As long as you earn honest money, that is all. Like when you have a family to bring up and a mortgage to pay, you know, the ten dollars was a lot, right? You can do house cleaning and [be] proud of it because you do good. I did not feel any lower that I did housework. I was loyal to me, to me, right? (Mrs. I).

For me, it's just a job like anything else. It's honest work. I just wanted to help my family (Mrs. P).

This is a job like other jobs (Mrs. Z).

Several women in this study derived great emotional satisfaction from working in domestic service. When the participants described how they completed their work-related duties, they spoke with considerable pride. The women were able to identify their employer's home as "their space." This served to give them a sense of familiarity and to make the job process more personally meaningful.

Well, I liked it. It's good for me. Cleaning is my thing. [Laughing] I used to make my husband back out the front door so he wouldn't leave shoe marks on the floor. I enjoyed it and I was good at it. I wasn't the only immigrant woman doing domestic work. Factory work is not for me. What do you do otherwise at my age? Reading was never my thing. I can crochet but I can't sit all day (Mrs. B).

I enjoy it because it is like my house already there. It is like my home, you know? It is like my home. [My family] they say I am crazy. I am working too much because I can not say no and I like it. They know that I am happy even though I am working too hard. Everybody asks me where you work and I say I am there and I am a cleaning lady, but I am not just a cleaner because it is like my house (Mrs. Z).

For me, I liked it. I like to see everything nice and neat. I will do it with all my heart, you know. Because listen, it does not matter what the job is, you do it (Mrs. H).

I like all parts of the job. If you know what you are doing, you can get quite good at it and it becomes easier. For me, when you like what you do for a living, it's a good job (Mrs. Q—my translation).

All of the respondents underscored the importance of finding the right type of employer.

A "good boss" made the job all the more personally rewarding. It is no accident that an enjoyable working environment lends itself to a healthy job attitude.

First thing is, you had to know the family. This is more important and then it depends in the way you wanted to work, but one thing important is make the contract first and have a good family (Mrs. D).

If your padrone is a bad one, the job was terrible (Mrs. B).

Sometimes you felt low [but] if I find nice people and I find an apartment to clean, that is what I liked better (Mrs. V).

I had good people to work for. I can't complain (Mrs. K).

Yes, it is a hard job for a lady because when you get to a certain age, you are tired but you want to stay with the job because you know the people. The people, they make you feel not like a working lady. You feel different because they are so good with me, you know? Can you come? Please and thank you all the time. When you feel it the padrona is not good with you, you cannot work good (Mrs. Z).

Work here in the church is my favourite because the people, they treat you good. They do not treat you like a slave. I love this job. They are very nice people here. I work, I work, I work but I do not get tired here (Mrs. L).

Domestic work is ill-defined as a job lacking in no particular skills and it is associated on many levels with the removal of household and human dirt. Two of the women workers

interviewed for this thesis made comparisons between their occupations and those in the higher-paying, professional markets.

Every job we humans do is important and necessary. Even doctors and nurses have to deal with unpleasant things worse than any house dirt. I don't think that's an easy job for them either. Even car mechanics have to work with smelly gasoline fumes (Mrs. Q—my translation).

It's no different than teaching, being a nurse, a secretary or anything else. If you work in a hospital, that's dirty too. If I worked in an office, how much of a big shot would I be with only one hour for lunch and twenty minutes for a break? I like it. Nobody bothers me. I wouldn't want to work somewhere where I had to be like a supervisor and order things and stuff. I like not having a lot of responsibilities (Mrs. P).

Comments like these suggest that on some level, these domestic workers question why certain occupations associated with the removal of waste (human or not) have become gendered as work that females were highly suited to do. The women, on some level, perceive that there is nothing intrinsically degrading about the work they perform but rather, the status the job is accorded is controlled by external forces beyond their control. This may be their greatest asset in overcoming the commonly held view that domestic service work is inherently degrading

#### **4.7 HEALTH ISSUES and DOMESTIC SERVICE**

One of the biggest health consequences associated with years of domestic service is the toll it eventually takes on your body. Domestic work may at times be boring and repetitive but it is also a form of manual labour that is very strenuous. Many of the women complained about chronic aching backs, sore feet, numbness in the arms, arthritis in the hands, tremendous weight loss, and painful varicose veins.<sup>29</sup> All of the women who had left

<sup>29</sup> At the time of this interview, Mrs. P had taken a leave of absence from her job as a chambermaid because she was scheduled to undergo minor surgery to remove some of her varicose veins. Since the operation, she must wear therapeutic support pantyhose which can cost anywhere from \$35 upwards per pair.



domestic service as an occupation at the time of this interview did so for the following reasons:

Because I could not take it any more. It was getting harder and harder. Come home, you do not see anybody. [My husband] used to say, "You are getting old before your time." I did not like it any more. I did it for too many years (Mrs. V)

I was coming home late. I was so tired you know, and sometimes I had a headache. Because it was a big place, first thing, and I was not paid very much, you know. And then, when you were coming home you were pooped, you know, so tired (Mrs. G).

I was sick and tired of working so I retired [at sixty-five] (Mrs. K).

Because I was thinking if I worked as a domestic [any longer], I would not be at peace. You know, you have to work day and night (Mrs. D, former live-in domestic).

It is boring and I never, never liked housework (Mrs. I).

Many of the women talked about how they are coping with the inevitability of aging and continuing to work in a physically taxing occupation. Some of the solutions the women talked about included cutting the hours spent on the job site from full-time to part-time days, and several of the older participants would only clean for clients living in condominiums or apartments, flatly refusing to work in houses with staircases and one or more floors. All of the women who are still employed confirmed they would continue working as long as their health remained good.

I do not know. It depends on how I feel. If I feel okay, I will continue it. If I find I can help somebody else, then I will go too if I feel okay. If I do not feel so good, so I have to stop (Mrs. H).

I am in good health and can do the work. For now, I want to keep working while my health is good (Mrs. Q, my translation).

I don't know if I'll stay until I retire. It depends on how my body survives (Mrs. P).

If I can, why not? I still have my power to do it (Mrs. Z).

The topic of retirement was met with mixed feelings; many of the women claimed they would not know how to occupy their time, while others worried they would not be able to stand the company of their husbands all day long. Some of the women maintained they enjoyed working, if only on a part-time basis, because they liked to be financially independent.

I want already. I want to go and retire, but who will pay me? Nobody pay me. Sometimes I go out with ten dollars and I need to put the gas in the car and I do not ask my husband. When I go out one day a week I feel free because I can go out with no children, or whatever (Mrs. L).

What am I going to do? I do not want to stay in the house every day alone, you know. I mean, I like to go out to make some dollars for myself. I mean, if I want to buy lots of handkerchief, like I say, you know. Just for the satisfaction sometimes, you know (Mrs. H).

Like I say, I cannot even think about it, the day that I have to retire. If I have to be sick that I cannot work, it is not choice, right? But the way I feel now, for sure I would like to carry on from sixty five if I am okay, health wise okay. To tell you the truth, I do not think that is good for anybody. Once you worked all your life, especially us older people, we started to work at a very, very, very early age and all of a sudden today you are working, tomorrow you are cut off from everything (Mrs. D).

Well, I want to leave all the other people, but I keep this place here. I like to keep this place here. When I work in the church, I have to work more [but] I never get tired (Mrs. L).

#### **4.8 SUMMARY**

The findings for Chapter Four were based on the participants' point of view. This actor-centered approach was used to explore how the women made meaning out of their personal and working lives (Colen and Sanjek, 1990). In this chapter, I have outlined the conditions of domestic service for the thirteen Post-War Italian immigrant women interviewed for this study. I have also tried to give the reader a sense of these women workers' personal and working lives before and after immigrating to Canada. A discussion of the two interlocking

forces (paid and unpaid work) is relevant for this thesis. The participants outlined the reasons why they remained in domestic service: they were able to set their own hours and organize their schedules to suit child care and family responsibilities, and the job is preferable to factory work and other service based occupations.

Domestic workers almost always work in isolation from other workers. This factor makes it difficult for them to form workers' unions or organize collectively. However, the women of my study were not powerless or passive victims of oppression. By focusing on a variety of individual strategies, the participants outlined ways in which they negotiated working conditions between themselves and their employers. The women of this study were active agents in their own lives. They were able to gain a sense of autonomy over the labour process which helped diffuse the stigma that is attached to domestic service. The participants also managed to make meaning out of their working lives by refusing to internalize societal notions that cleaning up someone else's dirt for a living is inherently degrading.

Several researchers (Dill, 1988; Glenn, 1986; Romero, 1987 and 1992) have commented that domestic work is a "bridging occupation" for white, European women undertaken for limited periods of time until they are able to move on to other higher paying and better jobs. My research shows that this assumption is not quite accurate. Only five out of the thirteen women I interviewed have retired. The rest of the women have remained in domestic service (or hope to) well into their sixties and seventies. The Canadian Job Futures: Occupational Outlooks manual commenting on labour market conditions for new entrants in the year 2001, predicts that immigrants will continue to be an important source of labour in the personal and household services. (Human Resources Development Canada, 1997-98).

In the next chapter, I compare the accounts of the women workers in this chapter with the construction of Italian immigrant women found in Italian-Canadian fiction.

## Chapter Five

### CONCLUSIONS: A TALE OF TWO TEXTS

*The picture that I face/ can tell you a life story/ about you and me and where we're been. . . It reminds me where I'm from./ It tells stories of gatherings and quiet mornings./ It cries out the strict moral codes/ of a life lived in the kitchen,/ weeping moments and joyful ones,/ of expressive hands wavering in the air./ It takes me home "An Italian Element" in Effe by Bruna Bertoni.*

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to make comparisons between my participants' experiences and the experiences of Post World War II Italian immigrant women found in Italian-Canadian fiction. This chapter draws on the work of Elizabeth Sarlo-Hayes, The Italian Woman in Post World War II Canada: Overt and Covert Stories (1997). Sarlo-Hayes compared factual accounts (culled from sociological and historical sources) with fictional accounts of Post-War Italian immigrant women's experiences, in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of their lives. In developing this chapter, I build upon the thematic organization of Chapter Four. Starting from these themes, I turned to places in the fictional texts where similar themes were emerging, to make my comparative analysis. Following a theoretical approach outlined in Chapter Two, this chapter explores "the line[s] of fault" (Smith, 1987) or places where the themes in the interview data and the themes in the fiction converge or diverge.

Pivato (1986; 1994) believes that the history of immigration has had such a profound impact on the collective memory of Italian immigrants that it emerges both consciously and unconsciously in first and second-generation literature. I discovered that there were some thematic similarities between my interview data and the story lines emerging in Italian-

Canadian fiction. In these instances, it can be said that “the historical is linked to the fictional” (Tuzi, 1997: 28). Conversely, there are limits to ways in which the fiction can be used to recreate immigrant Italian women’s lives (Sarlo-Hayes, 1997).

This chapter gave me the opportunity to pay attention to the theme of “The Journey” which I left unexplored in Chapters Three and Four. This theme intrigued me because I have always felt that during the writing of this thesis, I was forced to go on a journey of self-discovery. As I have come to the end of my journey, I felt that by leaving this theme for the final part of the chapter framed the design of the thesis better.

### **5.2 Absent Family Members**

Many Italian-Canadian writers examine the impact of family dislocation on immigrant women with a keen sensitivity. The Grandmother character in Marisa De Franceschi’s short story, “Peonies Trying to Survive,” (cited in Minni, 1989) had to relocate to another town in Italy far away from her daughters in order to find employment in post-war times. Looking back on her childhood, one of the daughters recalls:

Very rarely [did we ever see her]. She went away to work. Our father had gone to America and forgotten about us. So I guess she had no choice. She sent us money and clothes, but we rarely saw her. You couldn’t blame her, I suppose. One trip home and she would have used up all her savings (p. 69).

This short, poignant story is a fine example of an Italian working-class woman who had to venture far from home and hearth to secure her family’s economic livelihood. Although the Grandmother in the story is emotionally distant from her daughters, unlike Albani’s heroine Claudia Moreni, the author’s deserted protagonist is capable of acting resourcefully to take care of her children. De Franceschi has presented a rounded and realistic character sketch of

a strong woman, forced by economic circumstances to be temporarily separated from her loved ones.

Pivato (1986) suggests that in the history of Italian immigration to the New World, the more common condition was that of separated spouses: one or more members of a family were apart for long periods of time due primarily to the requirements of migrant work. This certainly was an experience a few of the women in my study were all too familiar with, as the reader discovered in Chapter Four. Mrs. Q had been separated from her mother at four months of age for a period of four years because her mother had gone away to work as a live-in wet nurse for a wealthy family living near the Italian-Swiss border. She recalled this part of her family history for me:

Many young women in Italy had to leave home to go into domestic service in those days. Even my mother went into domestic service before and after she was married. The padrona she was working for had just given birth and she didn't have enough milk to feed her baby, so she left me in the care of my grandmother to go to work for this lady. My grandmother had to give me bottled milk from the cow to drink as we did not have canned or powdered milk in those days. My mother stayed there until she weaned her charge off of the breast. After that, she wrote home to my father and grandmother to say that she was going to stay longer with her employers to send our family back home money to buy food. The padrone she worked for was an engineer and used to give my mother things like sugar and chocolate, which were luxurious items for us to buy. My mother also used to send us kids hand-me-down clothes after the baby she took care of grew too big (my translation).

The historical context for Mrs. Q's story is provided by De Grazia (1992: 191):

Italy [was] on a different course from other Western nations in which declining middle-class wealth and new opportunities for employment in growing tertiary or consumer-oriented industries caused the servant population to decline in the interwar years. In Italy, by contrast, practically no middle-class families wanted for help; even the most strapped petty bourgeois households managed to hire washerwomen. . . seamstresses. . . cooks, children's maids, and wet nurses.

In this example, the factual narrative's validity is bolstered by the presence of the author's fictional accounts. Mrs. Q's story and De Franceschi's story not only make for an interesting read, but also offer some important insights. Each woman's story debunks the stereotypical myth found in male-biased historical and sociological sources that present the Italian family as one cohesive unit where everybody's interests are the same<sup>30</sup> and where men are the sole breadwinners of the family.

### **5.3 Daily Realities**

Generally, the immigrant's desire has been one of material and lifestyle improvement: women's labour, both paid and unpaid, continued to ensure the survival and well-being of their families (Perin, 1992). Iacovetta (1982: 91) claims that the transition from Italian peasant worker to one who labours in an industrial capitalist system did not require a radical transformation on their part as these women were used to contributing many hours of hard physical labour to the family. As workers in Canada, though, they confronted new rhythms of work and life imposed by the industrial capitalist work day. Witness the fictional observations of Fabrizio Notte, a Canadian-born child of Italian immigrant parents in Antonio D'Alfonso's 1995 novel, Fabrizio's Passion:

So here we are. Thursday evening. Water is boiling in the pot. Twice a week, every Thursday and Sunday, Mother cooks pasta for us. If she is late, working overtime at the factory, it is either Lucia [Fabrizio's sister] or Nonna Angolina [his grandmother] who is responsible for preparing the [food] (p.148).

Compare this with the factual account of the daily domestic responsibilities of one of the participants in my interviews:

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<sup>30</sup> Perin (1994: 177) makes an interesting observation: "The history of the broken family is in contradiction to the popular myth of the happy Italian family, the united, close-knit family. In the social history of the large Italian family we find that its members are



Well, when I go home [from work], I make supper for my boys, my husband, cook and clean, and you had to do other work. This morning when I left, I left everything clean. I take the meat out for tonight. I think the boys, they come home for supper. I do not know. I have to cook for my son too because the wife, she is pregnant and does not go home for lunch. I make stuff for my son too because I worry too much (Mrs. L).

Italian patriarchal social norms dictate that it is the womenfolk who are greeted by the second day of work when they get home. This theme is present in both Italian-Canadian literature and in my data findings. Although the domestic duties of the female immigrant characters in the novel are made easier, in part, by the presence of an extended family arrangement, this is not the lived reality of Mrs. L as is evidenced by her own admission. It is interesting to note that the daughter-in-law's physical condition, coupled with her job-site duties, temporarily prevent her from carrying out some of her own domestic tasks, while Mrs. L's workload at home is made even heavier by the presence of the impending birth. This occurs despite the fact that she is juggling two part-time paid jobs. Iacovetta talks about how first-generation Italian immigrant women "not only endured such hardships but displayed a remarkable capacity to incorporate their new experiences as working-class women into traditionally rooted notions of familial and motherly responsibility" (1986: 91).

Domenico D'Alessandro's 65-year-old protagonist Gemma reflects back on her life as a newly arrived immigrant to Canada in the short story, Wednesday Morning:

She remembers her first job, starting at 5:00 p.m. and ending at 1:00 a.m. She had to clean two floors of medical offices. Hard work was not new to her; what was unbearable were those winter nights, waiting for the bus to get home (cited in Minni, 1989: 164).

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scattered in European countries and in North and South America. It is possible that in order to cope with the harsh reality of the fractured family it was necessary to maintain the myth of the unified family."

Similarly, sixty-something Mrs. V recalled a year early in her newly married life, wherein she juggled one full-time job as a spot-remover in a dry cleaning factory with two part-time jobs cleaning offices: one in a clothing store and the other at a sheet metal manufacturing plant.

I remember I would clean the office on Wednesday night after supper oh, from 8:00 to maybe 10:00. It wasn't very big so it didn't take me very long. [In 1959] My husband and I were living in the basement of my sister-in-law's house and we needed the money so we could move out and get our own flat so, on Saturday, I had to go clean an office down in Scarborough from 8:00 in the morning to 4:00 in the afternoon. I did that for about a year.

Unlike D'Alessandro's character Gemma, who had to rely on the inconvenient public transport system, fortunately Mrs. V, who lived in the downtown core but needed to travel to the very eastern end of Toronto's suburbs, had the benefit of kinfolk to rely on for transportation.

I would go with [her brother-in-law] in the car because he was working that way then. He came and picked me up when I was finished, oh, around 5:00.

Addolorata, an Italian immigrant working-class woman in Montreal's garment district describes her laborious day-to-day routine with stark realism in Marco Micone's second play, *Addolorata* (1991: 141).

Come back from the factory, prepare supper, serve it, eat it standing up, do the dishes, make the sandwiches, sweep the floor, do the laundry, iron, . . . go to bed at midnight, . . . get up at six, prepare breakfast, leave before everyone else, run to the factory, stay nailed to your sewing machine, get harassed by your boss, get underpaid, hold your pee, work by the piece, eat at the sewing machine, and start over again and again.

This scenario is fairly typical of the patterns I discovered in my research with regard to the jobs immigrant Italian women performed, both paid and unpaid, at home and in the workforce. For example, in addition to the emotional and physical "motherwork" duties Mrs. H faced as a new parent caring for an infant daughter, she was also required to fulfill

the obligations of her part-time job as a household cleaner for a large rooming house in the early-to-mid 1960s. Here is a sample of what her work week entailed:

On the Monday, I used to do all the washing. I wash their clothes and then I do some work in the bedroom, on Monday. When I went back on Wednesday, I would iron all those clothes, fold them back in place where they are supposed to be, and I clean a little bit, what do you call it, the living room, or something like that, you know, downstairs. On Friday, I had to start from the top: change all those beds, [and] clean all those rooms until downstairs. Friday was a lot of work. My God, the work comes on top of my head, you know? Friday was a black day for me.

The only participant in this study who ever cared for boarders in her home was Mrs. G. During the early 1960s, Mrs. G and her husband purchased a house in the St. Clair/Dufferin area that intersects one of Toronto's official Little Italies just shortly after she gave birth to her second child. To offset the costs of owning a new home, Mrs. G took in four male boarders. Her daily working routine consisted of an endless cycle of repetitive "cooking and cleaning and washing" for six adults and two small children.

It was never finished because I had [her newborn daughter] then. She was just born. She was a very little baby and there were four Italian boys, plus my husband, yes. Five with my husband. I had two rooms upstairs, but one it was a rented one with the two boys in there and two in the living room.

Living under very cramped conditions with little or no privacy (she maintains there was only one bathroom in the entire house) and with her boarders working odd hours, Mrs. G had to provide for their meals on a rotating shift *and* cater to the pressing needs of her immediate family. She described her working day as endless drudgery that left her feeling physically spent.

Those people, they were eating three times a day. They were always eating. So it was 1:00, or more, and I was still up, you know? I was not back in bed yet. I was really skinny. I tried to put a skirt on and it was going down to my feet. It was a hard job, hard work.

It is little wonder that Mrs. G eventually opted out of this arrangement and sought paid work outside the home once she availed herself of the services of a neighbourhood childcare provider. In contrast, the Maria character in Caterina Edwards' 1989 fictional work Prima Vera, is a permanent stay-at-home mother who decides not to leave the confines of her adopted home in Canada. (See Chapter Three for a fuller description). As a consequence Maria never truly learns how to speak English fluently. This prevents her from assimilating into the mainstream culture. Maria's world encompasses solely her house, her family and her boarders. She is able to derive temporarily a measure of emotional succor within the circle of close friendships she cultivates with her boarders, but they too will eventually depart leaving her devoid of any real sense of lasting happiness. In Mrs. G's situation, fact does not corroborate fiction. Mrs. G eventually learned how to speak English fluently, which gave her enough confidence to seek other forms of paid work outside the home. Now retired, she told me that one of the reasons she found cafeteria work so personally satisfying, was because she was able to enjoy the company of female co-workers. This would not have been possible if she had continued to care for boarders inside her home.

#### **5.4 Corporeal Problems**

Nowhere is the immigrant dream of *fare l'America*<sup>11</sup> more fully realized than in the prospect of home ownership. However, as Perin (1992: 27) notes, "Opportunity is a two-way street: the immigrant[s] certainly benefited from coming to Canada, but so did those who exploited [their] cheap labour." Material comforts are usually hard-won at a great emotional and sometimes, physical cost. Marisa De Franceschi's main character, Margaret

Croff, a middle-aged daughter of immigrant parents now living a comfortable life in North America, tries to come to terms with her mother's health problems, brought on by a lifetime of hard work.

What was it that had consumed my mother to the point of near death? Sheer physical exhaustion from cleaning people's houses? That was what she used to do then. She was a 'cleaning lady.' Because she was a good one, she was very much in demand and kept constantly busy. Or could it have been an adverse reaction to the bitter cold of winter? Unaccustomed to such inhumane temperatures, she might have breathed in too much frigid air on her way home, sweating, no doubt, beneath the clothes from having scrubbed floors and washed walls all day long (*Surface Tension*, 1994: 81).

Similarly, in Maria Mazziotti Gillan's<sup>32</sup> collection of poems, *Where I Come From* (1997: 44), the author writes an impassioned explanation for her mother's premature aging brought on, no doubt, by the many arduous tasks that filled her working day.

In memory, I see you/in the old, brown rocker,/your needle moving rhythmically/in and out of sleeves/of huge army coats,/see you, long after we are in bed,/pulling basting stitches,/till a pile of thread covers your feet,/see your hands scrubbing clothes/on the tin washboard, your face intent/and lined even at thirty,/remember your ironing our clothes/to crispness under the light/of a dim bulb ("Christmas Shopping For My Mother December, 1985").

These passages are illustrative of the very poignant and highly evocative sentiments of second-generation children trying to pay homage to their working-class parents. Sacrifices for the sake of the children are remembered and the cost of human health and monetary gains questioned (Pivato, 1991). Mary Melfi's female protagonist, Nina DiFiore, in her 1991 novel, *Infertility Rites*, bitterly remarks that, "my parents were too busy moonlighting to teach me Optimism" (p.137). The words "scrubbing" and "sweating" convey physical

<sup>31</sup> Literally, the expression translates as "To make America" but figuratively, it connotes with the Italian immigrant's desire to make a success of one's self in the land of opportunity which is believed to be North America.

<sup>32</sup> Maria Mazziotti Gillan is from Patterson, New Jersey and though technically, she is not Italian-Canadian, her poems were a personal favorite of mine.

activity performed at a fevered pitch. The description of “inhumane temperatures” in De Franceschi’s novel is symbolic of the less-than-adequate working conditions many Italian immigrant women encountered on the job site found both in the literature and in my transcripts. Listen to the words of one of the interviewees in this study:

I was coming home late. I was so tired, you know, and sometimes I had a headache. Because it was a big place, first thing, and I was not paid very much, you know. And then, when you were coming home you were pooped, you know, . . . so tired (Mrs. G).

Mrs. G may not speak with the eloquence of the two authors cited here, but in no way does this diminish the matter-of-fact feelings she articulates about her work-day tribulations. The quotation manages to suggest a sense of physical pain, “headache” and “pooped”, without using overly stylized wording. The fictional passages recollect and acknowledge the paid-labour contributions of the previous generations in a manner that is sensitive and pays tribute to them. Fiction supports fact in this instance as Mrs. G provides the reader with a first-hand glimpse into the bodily conditions and consequences of physically taxing labour.

### **5.5 Marital Relationships**

Gianna Patriarca articulates the “female condition” as a newly-arrived immigrant in her poem, “College Street, Toronto”: “we learned the language quickly/to everyone’s surprise/my mother embraced her new life/in long factory lines/while my father continued his pleasures/in pool halls thick with voices/of other men in exile” (cited in Pivato, 1998: 76). Working-class immigrant Italian wives are pitted against their insensitive husbands in Fiorella De Luca Calce’s 1990 novel, *Toni*. The father character, Vito, is condescending to his wife Anna, the underlying assumption in his argument being that his physical labours as a construction worker are much more demanding than those of his garment-worker spouse:

You're not the one who stands on hot asphalt in the sun all day, bent over with a shovel. The stink alone is enough to make any man lose his appetite. You don't know how it is to work between two infernos (p.16).

Anna will have none of this. She defends herself against her husband's accusations by countering his logic with her own protestations, "You think I like being chained to a sewing machine? I can't even go to the bathroom without the boss breathing down my neck" (p.16).

These fictional scenes are similar to the situations some of my participants encountered. Mrs. J's husband was the only spouse present during the thirteen interviews I conducted. His statements about his wife's financial contribution to the family's upkeep was telling: "I always had a job that I could support my family alone. . . Her help was always welcome but it was not necessary [for her] to work." Mr. J's opinions mirror those of the fictitious husband Vito in De Luca Calce's work. Mrs. J's paid-labour efforts are undervalued by her husband because they assume a secondary role in comparison to the spouse's primary role as the family breadwinner. Mr. J relegated his wife to a 'helpmate' role rather than acknowledging her as a fully fledged worker whose achievements are given equal merit. One explanation for this is the central role that the Italian male plays within the family as the top wage earner. As long as Mr. J does not view his wife's wage earning power as a threat, his rank within the social hierarchy of the family is maintained, and his pride escapes emasculation.

### **Parent/Child Interpersonal Relationships**

It has been said that the oppression of immigrant Italian women was often perpetuated by the women themselves. Most first-generation immigrant Italian women in Canada continued to dictate to their native-born daughters the same patriarchal cultural rules and codes passed down to them by their mothers while, at the same time, they desired a better

life for their daughters filled with opportunities they never had (Donati Gunn, 1990). These desires can include a good education (the value of which is paramount), a successful career, health, marital happiness, subsequent family stability, and a certain level of financial and material wealth. However, on Canadian shores, the immigrants of my mother's generation were confronted with glaring differences between their cultural values and those of the younger generation once their children left the relative stability of the family hearth and entered the public school system. These intergenerational struggles manifest themselves in the fictional literature repeatedly as I have shown in Chapter Three.

On the one hand, the women of my study were affected by the egalitarian spirit that pervades our North American society and desired for their children (both sons and daughters) the ability to be as self-determined as possible, while paradoxically, reinforcing conservative Old World values concerning the importance of marriage and childbearing. Although there was some emphasis placed on the manner in which their paid work performed outside the home could be used to attain a measure of personal freedom and satisfaction, none of the participants expressed ambivalence about the supposed 'natural' role or position within the family they played: the women maintained their primary function was as wives and mothers and, ancillary to this, they functioned as paid workers in the public realm.

Quebec's premier playwright Marco Micone is one of the few people from my generation who writes specifically about the plight of working-class Italian immigrants new to the Quebec labour force. The mother figure Anna, in Micone's 1982 play *Voiceless People*,



(*Gens du Silence*) tries to explain to her second-generation Italian-Canadian Quebecois children that she kept her low paying, low-status factory job as a piece-work sewer because,

Like everyone else . . . what I care about is what I did. In all my life . . . I've never had the joy of welcoming my children after school with a snack. I was a prisoner in the factory with forty other mothers like me. At lunch, we fought over the phone telling our kids who came home from school what to eat, and especially to remind them that we were preparing their future on our sewing machines (p. 82).

Although his female characters work in the garment sector of urban Montreal, their responses to their job conditions and subsequent exploitation are not completely incongruous with the feelings articulated by most of my participants: "I wanted the best for them, like every mother. This is why I worked so hard because I wanted to give them what I didn't have. Like I said, I came from a very poor family" (Mrs. B). Upon reflection, Mrs. K can say with considerable pride:

I didn't want my children to live the kind of life I had. I wanted better for them, to go to school and university. My life was hard at times, but with hard work and saving our money, my husband and I can say we are content and that we did well for our kids.

The fragile relationship between working mother and daughter is expressed in Gianna Patriarca's haunting, "A Mother Poem," in her 1997 collection of poems entitled, Daughters For Sale:

mamma took a job at the local hospital/long hours, midnight shifts,  
Sundays/she held the hands of dying old/and wiped the blood of premature  
mothers/she boiled the instruments and learned/to give advice/and every other  
afternoon she biked/for miles from town to town/injecting needles in  
contadini<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Italian for "peasant" woman worker.

mamma fed me ricotta<sup>34</sup> and maritozzi<sup>35</sup>/and in between kisses I could hear/her heart snap like a dry crust of bread/I could feel her body shake each time/she put her arms around me/and whispered good-bye/my screams didn't convince her to turn back/I watched her walk away toward the hospital/her sky blue sweater on her shoulders/her tight curls stiff as her footsteps/mamma never turned around/ (p.66-7).

Mrs. U's children have not honoured her with such poetic commemoration. Indeed, her statements suggest a lack of appreciation from her children for all that she has done for them. She maintained that she persevered through difficult times in her working career to secure a brighter future for her three sons than she herself enjoyed. What she wants, in return, is emotional acknowledgment that her sacrifices were not made in vain: "To listen, respect. To understand we [their parents] come work hard for the boss. Because they do not understand, especially the first one. I am not working for myself. Work for my son[s]."

The mother figure in Mary Melfi's novel, *Infertility Rites*, (1991: 29-42) scorns her graduate daughter's decision to study Arts in university, believing that a "practical" education in Law or Business would better suit her daughter's needs and fulfill her mother's dreams for her.

Mother gave up on me when I refused to become a success story Italian style: through marriage, . . . or better still, through education. . . When I decided to go into the arts she called me *stupida*. Even with my limited use of her maternal tongue I got the gist of her message. My bi-weekly checks are worth less than hers (as a full-time sewing machine operator, unionized) and she never lets me forget it. . . I cannot call my. . . mother up (she is at work contributing to a pension fund, like I should be).

In this instance, the Canadian-born daughter's work is devalued, despite the fact that she has an expensive post-secondary education. Nina DiFiore's Italian-immigrant mother measures

<sup>34</sup> A delicious curd-like cheese, creamy and very soft.

<sup>35</sup> A sweet bread bun shaped oblong or round.

success in the new world mostly in terms of financial gain: a course of action that veers her child off this path is looked upon as a lofty and therefore, useless endeavour. The Mother's attitude seems unusual, especially when one considers the opinions my respondents expressed in this study.

We did not have much to say, you know, oh, I would like her to be a lawyer, or her to be a doctor, or this thing. I was not thinking very much ahead because at that time, like, I had three kids to bring up and a mortgage to pay and all the expenses. I always told them, okay, if you want to go to school, I can help you out as much as I can. My two oldest ones, they never went to college. They just finished grade thirteen. Actually, [the eldest daughter] never finished thirteen because during March break, she found herself a job and she has been doing that since (Mrs. J).

The first one go three years in the college. The second one, did not want to go, but at least he is working. He is a mechanic. And the other one, this year he is finished grade thirteen but I do not think he is going to go to university because he is a little bit slow. I want him to go so he can go work (Mrs. U).

I always told them to go to school and learn a trade. To go to school as far as possible. We never forced our kids. The older kid, we never had any problem because he said, actually, I told him, I said, 'you have got to find yourself a job now.' The younger one, he was eighteen. He said, 'I do not like to sit behind a desk. I will do something else.' 'It is your choice', I said. 'Do what ever you want.' I want him to learn a trade. He went to Grade Thirteen. Then he says, 'I want to be a mechanic, to go to the United States.' I said, 'you go there and be a mechanic' and he is. You know, that is the way they choose (Mrs. J).

All of the women I interviewed underscored the importance of attaining *any* formal education. They saw education as a means to knock down barriers and gain equal access in the highly competitive job market. Whether each participant's child acquired no more than the equivalent of a Grade Thirteen education (Ontario Standards) or a Trade School Diploma was immaterial, nor was any distinction made over the relative merits of a Business or Science degree, as opposed to a Liberal Arts degree. All of interviewees intrinsically

equated their children's employment and subsequent financial successes with the fact that they had obtained more education than their parents had.

### **5.6 The Stigma Associated with Domestic Work**

The reader discovered in the "Results and Analysis" section of Chapter Four, that many (but not all) of the participants in this study indicated that they were immune to the low-status stigma often conferred on the occupation of domestic service. It is interesting to note that the few passages of literature I found that broached this subject matter tend to conflict with my research findings; however, if we examine both sources (fact and fiction) more closely, we will find that the statements the women of my interviews made offer a richer, more complex assessment of the problem than is found in the fiction.

Work that involves cleaning up after other people is regarded as a source of shame by the father of the child narrator in Liliane Welch's short story, "A Sense of Voice" (*Pillars of Lace*, 1998: 88). The Father character likens the sin of immorality to people who do domestic/household work. He admonishes his willful daughter with a stern warning believing that she will be frightened into compliance by his prophecy:

My father pontificated, "If you don't obey the priest and memorize the Catechism you'll become a cleaning woman in the hospital emptying bedpans, or in the mines scrubbing toilets."

It is interesting to note that the daughter does not share his view:

That didn't scare me because I had befriended old Reuter, a miner whose hand I used to hold when, as a small child, I walked him from work, and I liked a charwoman who lived down the street (p.88).

In the novel, *The Lion's Mouth* (1982), Bianca Bolato's Venetian middle-class immigrant mother internalizes the stigma of being a worker in the lower echelons of the service sector:

Mama soon found staying home in the latest bare house in the latest bare suburb intolerable. . . She began working as a waitress several evenings a week. She did not tell [her relatives back in Italy] or Aunt Elsa. Perhaps she was a bit ashamed. She was the educated one, and now she was reduced to this (p.110).

And Marco Micone's immigrant Italian labourer Addolorata regards her job as a garment worker in Montreal's needle trades as "dirty work." She blames her husband for her lot in life because her family economic circumstances forced her to take a sewing job with longer hours and better pay, as opposed to taking a position the protagonist found personally more satisfying.

You are the one who made me take that job. Nobody else. If I had continued working part-time at The Bay, in time I would have been working a full week. I'd be a saleslady. Behind a clean counter, with clean people. I would wear clean underwear (*Addolorata*: 1991: 122).

In the examples above, the one fictional female character who was immune to any negative connotation surrounding domestic/household work was a small child who had yet to join the ranks of the workforce and subsequently, her opinion could in no way have been founded on real life experience. The adult members of these stories know all too well the daily realities of working in a ghettoized job firsthand.

One of the questions I asked each woman in my study to answer at the end of our interview session, was whether or not they would object to their children working in the same occupations as their mothers. This particular question opened up an area for discussion. Some of the participants were strongly opposed to the very idea that their native-born and Canadian educated children should follow in the steps of their mothers.

I would not want my daughters to work as a domestic. They were going to school. They had a good education and they have a good job. [Her first-born daughter], she used to work as a secretary all day at City Hall and sometimes, she was the interpreter too, you know. Domestic work seems as though you are helping, like a servant. You are serving people. . . instead, when you are doing work in an office, you are an office girl. You have a bit more high level of job (Mrs. G).

No way I want her to be domestic. I want to try the best for study after four years in Canada university. No, no, no, no, I wanted that she studied, tried the best. Always try the best (Mrs. D).

No because why should they do what I do. I do it because I know I have to do it. This is how it has changed. It is not like before any more because the kids now, they like to go to school. They have got to do something, something more better. If you do not want to go to school, then you do housekeeping. Because you do not have any school, you do not know too much. I have grade five. . . you cannot do anything. That is it, you have to get a degree. Like my son, he go to the college to go and be a policeman (Mrs. U).

Well, I do not suggest that is to do for young people. I came here in Canada twenty years old. I could not go to school. Without education, you cannot find anything better. So you have to do whatever you find. But for our children, they are born here. They have opportunity to go to school. To have an education. To have a good job. When you find a good job, you stay for that kind of job. It is better to go to that job. First of all, you make more money. You never worked so hard. You do not have to carry a machine but mostly with the mind. I figure this way. I mean, you have an education. I do not think it is so hard like us working the housekeeping. I think it is a lot lighter (Mrs. H).

If they wanted to take care of children, I would say yes, but house cleaning, I would say no to them because here, they have more school and they can do something better. No mother would like her daughter to not do better than her. I didn't have much choices in my life. My daughters had more choices (Mrs. B).

A few of the interviewees were more ambivalent about their position on the subject.

I'd say okay if she wanted to work as a domestic. It's a job like anything else. For me, when you like what you do for a living, it's a good job (Mrs. Q).

If they wanted to do domestic work, I'd let them. It would be up to them for them to be happy (Mrs. P).

I do not know what I would say, but I would say look, if this is what you want to do, it is fine. There is nothing wrong with it as long as you earn honest money, no matter how you do it. That is all. I could not say, you know, I would not let you do house cleaning. I would not be ashamed of you for that. I would not say, you are crazy for doing that. If this is what you want to do. . . if this is what you like to do, it is fine with me (Mrs. D).

Sarlo-Hayes (1997:47), in her exploration on the social and cultural changes affecting the Italian mother-child relationship in Canada, poses this question, "Is it conceivable that immigrant mothers' internalized feelings of negative self image were somehow communicated to their daughters? It does not seem unthinkable." She is making specific reference to how second-generation writers incorporate their mother's feelings of inadequacy in their writing. Her point is valid but I hasten to add that, once again, we interpret the experiences of our fore-mothers in print through the words of the second generation. There is a correlation between how each woman of this study was affected psychologically by the stigma of working in the domestic trades and how much satisfaction they derived from their jobs. Those women least affected continue to work in the occupation on some level either in a full-time (or at the very least) part-time capacity.

Unlike the immigrant workers in the fiction, none of the women in this study equated what they did for a living with a lack of moral or personal character, whether or not they objected to their children working as domestics. The fact that most of the women desired for their second-generation children a better life than the one their mothers had is neither culturally nor socio-economically specific. Is it such a gross over simplification to state that all parents want this for their children, regardless of who they are? Granted, the opinions held by some of the participants indicate that on some level, they live out the great North American dream of prosperity and happiness vicariously through their children, but I do not

believe the statements made by the interviewees are an admission that their own lives are incomplete and devoid of personal or professional satisfaction. First-person accounts of how immigrant women felt about their working lives suggest a more complicated picture than that found in the fiction.

### **5.7 *L' Italia Bella No More***

Italian-Canadian writing has one major metaphor, that of the journey. The immigrant journey is a metaphor for the journey of life. In this sense, Italian-Canadian writing belongs to the oldest literary traditions in the world: The Bible's Exodus, Homer's *The Odyssey*, and Dante's *La Divine Comedia* (Pivato, 1990). Since immigrants have traveled from one place to another, their writing contains and expresses a sense of movement (Verdicchio, 1990). An example of this theme is presented in Gianna Patriarca's poem, "Returning." Here, the image of the ocean crossing is stark and is suggestive of motion or sea sickness conveyed by the double meaning of the word "vomit"-- both passenger and ship are thrust upon Canadian shores in a forceable manner:

In the sixties we came in swarms/like summer bees/smelling of something  
strange/wearing the last moist kiss/of our own sky./We came with heavy  
trunks/empty pockets/and a dream.

I was one of them/tucked away below the sea line/on the bottom floor of a  
ship/that swelled and ached/for thirteen days/our bellies emptied into the  
Atlantic/until the ship finally vomited/on the shores of Halifax/there, where the  
arms and legs/of my doll fell apart into the sea/finding their way back over the  
waves./My mother's young heart wrapped around me/my sister crying for bread  
and mortadella<sup>36</sup>./We held on/two more nights on a stiff, cold train/headed for  
Toronto/where the open arms of a half forgotten man/waited (*Pillars of Lace*,  
1998: 206-7).

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<sup>36</sup> An Italian luncheon meat that was forced upon me in sandwiches countless times throughout my childhood



Tales of difficult sea journeys are abundant in my transcribed interviews. Very few of the women in this study could afford the luxury and expense of air travel except for Mrs. P, Mrs. Z, and Mrs. U. The trip from Italy to Canada took roughly two weeks by boat, according to the participants, where upon each immigrant disembarked in Halifax, Nova Scotia and then transferred by train to their final destination. Many Italian emigrant women traveled without their spouses, not knowing how to speak any English. These women, aside from dealing with their own feelings of nausea, were responsible for the safety of the children who accompanied them. Mrs. G describes a fairly typical travel scene.

Both of us came by boat at that time, you know. It took about nine days, I think, and they put you in a cage. All those cages. Everybody must have felt like animals in those cages there, you know. And then they put you on a train.

The metaphor of the journey is also linked with the image of death, death that is associated with sacrificing one lifestyle in Italy for another in Canada. The elegiac mode of writing so commonly found in Italian-Canadian literature conveys a sense of loss and mourning: this style focuses on a nostalgic yearning for the world left behind in Italy (Hutcheon, 1990). In contrast to the stereotyped image of the happy mamma making spaghetti sauce, there is, instead, a profound sense of the death experience in Italian-Canadian literature (Amprimo and Viselli, 1991). It is so pervasive that Pivato (1982: 131) points out,

At times [Italian-Canadian writings] seem to be addressed as much to the dead as to the living. From descriptions of funeral rites to symbolic and cultural death, Italian-Canadian writers demonstrate they understand the sense of loss that comes from cultural and familial dislocation brought on by immigration: first-generation parents die in a land far from their native birth, and family and friends left behind in the old world die never to set eyes upon their loved ones again.

An example of this is evident in Isabella Colalillo-Katz's six-part poem, "The Sound of a Distant Wailing." It was too long to recreate for my purposes, but I have included a few salient pieces that express her lament:

The quiet shuffle of bedrooms slippers/trembles/against the crackling sound/of a rogue wind./fingering stiff black clothes./Again the image unfolds/in a filmy glaze/over the soundless landscape./Two crows observe the movement/as the one legged woman/who was our aunt and mother,/grandmother,/sister and friend/is laid to final rest/in the curve of this wild green land/she never really knew./Alive only/in our memories/and fading photographs (*Pillars of Ice*, 1998: 150).

And in a homage she wrote and dedicated to her mother, the poet remembers the vestiges of an ancestral world :

She writes /in the old dialect,/stringing words/like rare jade/on a strong white thread./Her memories a relief/a fresh breath/shaping the theme of her poem:/her lost youth/her violent removal from the womb/of her mountains after the war/the loss of her people/their shared language/and lost dreams ("My Mother's Poem" in *Pillars of Ice*, 1998: 152).

Many of the immigrant women in this study were enthusiastic about the prospect of starting life anew in a country they believed would afford them a better life than the one they were accustomed to in Italy, but some also presented narratives of painful familial separations marked by the phenomenon of immigration similar to the ones found in the fiction.

It is sad when you left that whole country, to leave the people where you have your relations because here for us, you do not have anybody and then we meet sometimes, or they miss you. I had my family there. I called every two weeks. When they are sick, even once a week, because we would think about them and they would call because we are suffering so much about the families (Mrs. D).

My aunt, she had a broken heart when we came here you know, but what are you going to do? (Mrs. G).

When I told my family I am going to Canada and join my husband. . . oh, it was bad with the uncle. My mother, I cried for my mom (Mrs. Z).

My father, always he wanted to come to visit me [in Canada]. He used to say to me, 'okay, maybe next year I will come. Maybe next year.' So, all this time, he had an accident with a motor bike and then he died (Mrs. H).

Given the similar themes found in both the women's stories and the fiction, it is not surprising to find that in both Italian-Canadian literature and Italian social history, the theme of exile has been very prominent. From Roman times Italians have always been leaving home, trying to return, or, like Vergil's Aeneas, trying to find a new home both figuratively and literally. Italian-Canadian writers are continuing in this tradition of exploring the state of exile. Repeatedly, we find similar sentiments in the literary works: separation from family and friends; guilt or regret at leaving home; nostalgia for an idealized past; inability to communicate because of language problems; and loss of identity. The sense of homelessness is not restricted to first-generation immigrant parents. It is also experienced by their native-born children, who must deal with the duality of their life experience in an Italian home while trying to function in an English society (Pivato, 1985). Mrs. G describes how difficult it was for her and her children during those first years spent in Canada as they desperately tried to resettle and adjust to their new life.

I was lonesome for my kin, you know, for everybody when we came. When you immigrate first, you do not know the language and you do not know how to get people to [understand] and [her Italian-born infant daughter] could not stay up all night with somebody else because she was crying. She did not understand the people, what they are saying and the people, they did not understand her.

All of the interviewees I questioned indicated that they had gone through a period of adjustment that was disorienting and frustrating initially, especially when language barriers impeded this process. Yet in spite of their feelings of exile and alienation in Canadian society, the immigrant Italian women of this study knew, at least on some level, that they had to adapt to their new life lest they forever remain suspended in a state of limbo pining away

for a country they might never reside in again. The perspective of the powerless, displaced and marginalized immigrant, who did not make the transition from Italy to Canada well, is evident in the works of Rosanna Battigelli. Second-generation Angie is always at odds with her mother, who floats between two worlds never fully coming to terms with either one. The Italy of her youth is a place forever frozen in time, in her memory:

Stubborn woman, Angie thought. Stubborn, stubborn woman. And narrow-minded. Stuck in the old ways. She may have adopted a new country forty years earlier, but she had chosen to remain in the old country emotionally. Sure, she adapted somewhat, learning the language by watching television and enjoying the conveniences she had never experienced in post World War II Italy, but her heart had remained in the old country, *l'Italia bella*, and so she had continued the traditions and expected her children to keep them alive as well (*The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Literature*, 1998: 171).

Character sketches of first-generation Italian immigrants like this one in Battigelli's work abound in many of the literary sources I reviewed for this thesis. The women interviewed for this study were toughened by the trials and tribulations they encountered in this country and displayed a remarkable ability to acculturate without losing their Italian sense of self. I asked many of the women I interviewed whether or not they had ever considered leaving Canada for good to return to their native land. Most of participants had resigned themselves a long time ago to settling in Canada permanently.

No. Because now, mostly the time of my life, I stay here in Canada. See, I came here at twenty years old and now I am fifty-six so that is a long time. Now I am used to staying here, you know (Mrs. H).

The acquisition of a family home and the arrival of children were doubly significant and provided an even stronger rationale for remaining permanently in this country.

The beginning was rough. I cried so many times. If I had the money there, I was going back right away but then you know, the kids growing up and then they go to school. They get settled here and then forget it (Mrs. G).

No, how can you? You see, we had broken up our family by coming over here, do I have to do that again? Break up the next family again that I had to leave? We go back for a visit (Mrs. J).

These revelations suggest that the impetus which compelled many of the immigrants to venture far from the old country—the need to secure a better livelihood for their families—was still paramount. Once the immediate or nuclear family had been established, ties to kinfolk in the old country were harder to maintain over the passing of time:

No. I know nothing there. I go three times in Italy for a visit, but my parents are no more there. So, I go there and there is nothing. I work here thirty years, more, so at least I have a house (Mrs. L).

These discoveries were not surprising in of themselves, but what I did find astonishing was how some of the immigrants were vehemently opposed to the notion of re-immigrating to Italy. Included below are some of their comments:

No. I would never go back there to live. It is good for a holiday but if you go in the Winter in Italy, it is cold. The house is so cold inside, you do not feel comfortable. Even with my sister and brother, I do not feel comfortable any more. My husband, he wants to leave [Canada] for a break. I said, do you want to go, you go, not me. I will stay here. I am working every day. There, I do not care. I want to stay here because I am happy even though I am working too hard (Mrs. Z).

In the beginning, I went back there but not any more because in here it is different, the story over here. I like it here. I like it. In the beginning, I cried for a little bit, but after I married, I did not have anything. My husband never liked Italy. His mother, she died last year. He went three, four times to see his mother before she died. No, he never liked Italy. He said to my mother-in-law, 'in case I die here in Italy, send me back to Canada' (Mrs. U).

The immigrant women of this thesis had internalized the view that their place is here, in Canada, alongside their families. They no longer belong in the Italy of their youth because too much time has elapsed, nor are most of them obsessed with the desire to return to Italy, save for the occasional visit. Canada is equated with "home" as Italy now comes to represent

the land of exile (Pivato: 1991). The participants' lives are firmly established within Canadian shores and they know the post-war Italy they left behind is vastly different in character from the one they confront every time they go for a holiday. Perhaps Gianna Partiarca captures this feeling best when she states: "we don't discuss the distance anymore/returning is now/the other dream/not American at all/not Canadian or Italian/it has lost its nationality" ("Returning," in *Pillars of Lace*, 1998: 206-7).

### **5.8 SUMMARY**

A review of some themes in Italian-Canadian fiction and in my participants' accounts of their experiences, reveals that there are some commonalities between the two sources. In the instance of family dislocation brought on by the act of emigration, the literature corroborates my interviewees' experiences. Fictional accounts of De Franceschi's nameless Grandmother character in her short story, "Peonies Trying to Survive" (cited in Minni, 1989), are backed by the childhood experiences of Mrs. Q.

Regarding Italian immigrant women's enormous contribution of both paid and unpaid labour to their families' well being, the fiction supports my participants' experiences. Both sources detail the seemingly unending cycle of domestic duties post-war immigrant Italian women faced every day once they got home from work. The male narrator in D'Alfonso's novel *Fabrizio's Passion* (1995) reveals that it is only the women in his family who prepare the daily meals. This assertion is upheld by the testimony of many of the participants in this study who maintained that they alone were responsible for the daily upkeep of their households. When looking at the details surrounding the work-related tasks immigrant Italian women performed on the job, the fiction follows the participants' narratives with

striking accuracy. In the exploration of corporeal problems, the physical consequences of a lifetime of having to perform arduous work are revealed in the personal testimonies of my respondents. In this instance, the images emerging from the fiction do not contradict the experiences of the women in this study.

In the areas of marital and parent/child interpersonal relationships, the fictional accounts of Italian Canadian women are also not fundamentally different from my participants' accounts. The importance of marriage and motherhood for the first-generation women of this study cannot be underestimated. It is also a major theme in Italian-Canadian fiction. The fiction acknowledges the personal sacrifices that Italian immigrant mothers made to secure their children's futures. The fiction also supports the participants' assertion that the sacrifices they made were rooted in a family-based ideology of motherhood (Brodkin Sacks, 1989). That is, the women of this study legitimized their sacrifices because they are mothers who believe they are responsible for maintaining their families' sustenance. However, in making comparisons between the fictional accounts of Italian immigrant women's lives and the experiences of my participants, a noticeable divergence can be seen with regard to the stigma associated with domestic service. The fiction fails to recognize that Italian immigrant women workers' family-derived values about motherhood (and marriage) can be used to offset society's denigration of domestic service. I believe this explains why Italian immigrant women are constructed as workers who have no sense of agency in the fiction. My data has uncovered how the women of this study used these family-based values to legitimize their positive evaluations of their own skill and worth as paid workers (Brodkin Sacks, 1989).

Conversely, my participants' narratives challenge fiction writers' assumption that Italian immigrant women have no sense of agency.

In sum, the personal narrative and fiction are genres that can relate ordinary experiences to the larger societal forces, but there are limits to the extent to which literature can be used to recreate immigrant Italian women's lives (Sarlo-Hayes, 1997). All the participants of my study were literate, but they never wrote or published what is commonly referred to as literature. The interviewees were too busy trying to eke out a living during those difficult first years of resettlement in Canada. Not only did they not have access to publishers, they did not have the time and I would venture to guess, the energy to write at the end of a long, working-day. Those first-generation pioneers who did manage to publish their works in Canada may have voiced working-class sentiments, but they too, were privy to a good education of some sort and led a very different lifestyle from the women of my interviews.<sup>37</sup> These findings then, prompt the question, what audience were the literary works intended for? To the best of my knowledge, the women of my interviews never read any of the works cited in this thesis. My mother, for example, reads popular romance novels originally published in English, then translated into Italian, that I take out for her from the public library. As a child the only material I ever saw her read were the black and white "Fumetti" magazine serials imported from Italy.<sup>38</sup> Given the fact that most Italian-Canadian literature is published predominantly for either a French or English-speaking public, one must read

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<sup>37</sup> The one exception from the early 1950s period of Italian-Canadian literary creation is Gianni Grohovaz who came to Canada as a displaced person and worked in Northern Ontario as a railway labourer. He wrote of his experiences in a autobiographical narrative, *Strada Bianca*, which was published posthumously in 1989 (Tivato, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> This is the Italian version of an adult cartoon magazine. These photoromance serials depict soap opera story lines in print. Each character's dialogue is captured in a bubble of smoke-like cloud. The verb "fumare" in Italian means, "to smoke" and this is the source of their classification.



these works with a critical eye and remember that the second-generation of authors are giving voice to a generation of post-war immigrant women who had neither the means, nor the opportunity to write for themselves.

This is not to suggest that sociological or historical studies tell complete "truths" as well, for that is a relative term. It would be naïve of me to think that the participants in this study fully disclosed to me all the less-than-satisfactory aspects of their current lives. However, as a research tool, their revelations offer to us a valuable and very much needed source of cultural history.

In her book, Looking Through My Mother's Eyes: Life Stories of Nine Italian Immigrant Women in Canada (1997), Del Negro states that under the banner of male bias in academic discourse, a large part of women's culture which is composed of personal narratives has been overlooked, trivialized and marginalized because it falls outside of the public realm. She maintains that the way in which people (specifically, immigrant women) craft tales of their past to create meaning in the present is filtered through the lenses of gender, ethnicity, social class and situational context. Since formal education has largely been absent from the past experiences of the women in this study, life story and anecdotal evidence are natural vehicles for their expression and, as Del Negro states, "[are] also used as a coping mechanism through which narrators achieve greater insight into their lives" (p.21). Consequently, a life story is a blending of fact *and* fiction, and possibly the most obvious way to mesh the two.

### **5.9 Personal Observations**

I entered into the process of writing this thesis with some trepidation because I shared with the author Pivato (1985-1988: 29) the notion that, "My Italian background, . . . is at

times a handicap.”<sup>39</sup> I wondered whether or not my research would be tainted by my own biases because I had so many preconceived notions about the culture I had inherited from my mother. I believe I looked at Italian culture in two diametrically opposed ways: on the one hand, I liked Italian high culture for its literature, art, and music, while on the other hand, I disliked Italian culture for its aspects I saw as being restrictive for women (Zucchi, 1988). I was not entirely comfortable with the emphasis Italian culture places on motherhood and marriage, ties to the family, and religion. This study has fulfilled its mission in that it has given me a forum to question, challenge, and negotiate the significance of my culture with respect to how it affects my research.

The writer Gina Valle (1998: 8) opines that cultural heritage is manifested through such things as language, food, storytelling, music, and religion. Though one can argue that “culture” itself is an ambiguous term, perhaps Valle is correct in her assertion. As I struggle with the duality of being a second-generation Canadian feminist of Italian descent, the one element that does give me some sense of affinity with my community and my culture is language. Despite the fact that modern Italy is a land of over three dozen major dialects and numerous minor ones (Loriggio, 1996: 92), there is a commonality in Standard Italian that allows us the ability to communicate with one another. What I gain from choosing to live amongst those who originate from my mother’s country is the ability to speak a language that I truly enjoy conversing in. I find I miss the opportunity to speak Italian when I am

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<sup>39</sup> Pivaro (1994: 51) explains: “In the United States, I cannot help but see the preoccupation with the hyphenation of Italians as part of the anti-defamation movement. Italian-American history, myth, writing and cinema are dominated by the figure of the gangster, so much so that in the U.S. the term *Italian* is almost synonymous with *Mafia*. The epitome of this is Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather*, both novel and film. . . . In Canada we have no version of Puzo’s *Godfather*, nor an equivalent history of glorifying the gangster. Although there is some American influence on the image of Italians in Canada there is no automatic association with crime. Hyphenation in Western Canada does not seem to carry the same negative connotation as in Central Canada.”

away from my family, friends and neighbours, and this is something I would have never have discovered had I not undertaken this study. In retrospect, I see now that my cultural biases were my greatest academic tool for they constantly forced me to reevaluate the strengths and weaknesses of my assumptions and in doing so, rather than tainting the research process, I was kept more self-aware and honest throughout the entire study.

The discovery of one article written by researcher Franca Iacovetta on the Domestic Scheme of 1951-1952 to import Italian immigrant women to Canada as domestic workers engendered in me a desire to delve further into the social and historical literature on post-war Italian women of my mother's generation. Informed by my own personal job experiences, I wanted to research a group of first-generation Italian immigrant women who had performed some type of paid work outside the home as household cleaners to discover more about their paid work activities, both in Italy and in Canada. My research objectives were to discover how post-war immigrant Italian domestic workers made meaning out of their lives and achieved a sense of personal satisfaction given the physically arduous, dirty, low paying and sometimes degrading nature of the job. Although many of the women recounted similar resettlement difficulties in this country with respect to language, family dislocation, feelings of alienation and unfamiliarity with Canadian society, as well as health and marital problems, and the stresses resulting from having to juggle paid work with "motherwork", what I found was that all of the participants in this study constructed their narratives as success stories.

My own personal enjoyment of fiction formed the basis for the literary dimension in this study. I wanted to know more about the lives of immigrant Italian women. In particular, I

was interested in the stories being written about women workers. This desire culminated in the discovery of many sources of Italian-Canadian literature: I did not know that such a canon even existed. Although my search proved fruitful, I quickly discovered that there was a lack of positive descriptions of immigrant Italian women workers in the fiction. Wanting to go beyond images and stories of passive, ignorant, mute and destitute immigrant women acted as a catalyst to explore further what the literature was really saying. The research objective, then, was to examine the social construction of these women in order to better determine how the literature perpetuates and challenges stereotypes. By analyzing and comparing the factual and fictional experiences of post-war Italian immigrant women, I was able to explore where the factual stories culled from my interview data diverged from and converged with the representations in the fiction I feel that the flesh and blood people of my narratives are infinitely more interesting than fictional character types. Italian-Canadian literary works that represent solely the uglier and negative side of immigrant Italian women workers' lives belie the success stories I uncovered in my transcripts and possibly in the countless other stories of first-generation women of my mother's age waiting to be discovered. The post-war Italian immigrant women of this study carried with them to these shores a particular dream which they proceeded to obtain within the confines of the North American society. In this process, as in others, the immigrant was a protagonist even if she could not foresee the shape or direction their lives would eventually take (Perin and Sturino, 1992).

I started to research and write this thesis to learn about the labour experiences of a group of Italian immigrant women from my mother's generation for professional reasons, but I

was also motivated by personal interests to learn more about the fictional works of several Italian-Canadian writers. In the process, I learned a few things about myself. My mother supported my involvement in this project and my decision to pursue post-secondary research in the field of Women's Studies. As she once angrily told me, "I feel cheated I didn't get the chance to have an education." Though I sense at times that she is embarrassed about her inability to speak English fluently, what Mother fails to fully realize is that without her unfailing support as a colleague, mentor and friend, coupled with her commitment to this project, this study would have evolved into a completely different type of thesis. If the Italian immigrant women of my mother's generation have been absent in the academic and fictional literature of the past, then it is high time for my generation to bring their stories to the foreground not by excluding their first-hand accounts, or by revamping their narratives in a way that distorts reality, but by really listening and working cooperatively with them, perhaps in a joint process akin to this one.

### **The Kitchen Table Talks—Last Thoughts**

As a final tribute to the women who made this study possible, I leave a few lines from the poetic works of two of my favourite Italian-North-American female writers. These poems are evocative of the respect I have for all working women, especially those who continue to selflessly make personal sacrifices for the health and welfare of their families. The first offering explores best the complex nature between many mothers and their daughters. It certainly produced a shock of recognition in me when I first read it. The second poem, I believe, expresses a desire all adult daughters like myself have for their aging mothers—the

joy of serenity, of a life that lives out its final years in peace and happiness free from all the worries that plagued our mothers when they were younger women.

"Connections" from Maria Mazziotti Gillan's Where I Come From (1997) Guernica: Toronto.

Some days, when the world/seems to be chasing me/with an axe and I'm driving along,/on the way home from work,/or to the post office or some other/ordinary place, I find myself/pulling into my mother's driveway/almost as though the car/decided, incredibly, to drive/toward there instead of heading/for home where the clothes wait/to be washed and the dinner cooked/and my poems wait to be placed/in clean white envelopes/and sent out to editors./Anyway, there I am, without/intending to be, knocking/on my mother's door and/she is there. She welcomes me,/smiling and criticizing,/glad to see me/even though she tells me/my hair does not look right/and why don't I wear some make up/and if she doesn't tell me,/ who will? She cleans off/the already clean white table/in the basement kitchen/where she does all her cooking/(the first floor kitchen/is never used, and looks/showroom new) and takes out a cup/and pours me an espresso/without even asking and looks/in the refrigerator to see if there is anything/else that I want. She asks/about each item, warms up/some pasta and fasoli<sup>40</sup> or some lentils and rice,/and sits down to talk. I marvel/at how small she is when she sits down,/her hands delicate,/with tiny bones, and her body compact./Looking at her face, I realize,/suddenly, that she could die,/that if she were not here/for me, I would have no one/to go to for sustenance,/as I come to her, looking/for the food that satisfies/all hunger, knowing that no matter what,/she is there for me, and that I need/to have her there, as though/ the world were a quaking bog/and she, the only solid place/on which to stand.

From Gianna Patriarca's 1997 collection of short poems entitled Daughters For Sale

(Guernica: Toronto), here is the second stanza of "Changes":

I want to believe she is/now doing all the things/she had no time for/the things that require plenty/of time, a gift of retirement/of grown children and dead husbands/this woman who ran everywhere/and whose eyes opened before the/sky did, before the sun did/this woman who never sat for a meal/but ate standing as she choreographed/the serving of everyone.

<sup>40</sup> "Fasoli" is the Italian word for "beans" and this is a classic and popular dish

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## **Appendix A**

### **STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT**

My name is Stephanie Bellini and I am a graduate student in the Master of Women's Studies program at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am conducting a study to learn about post-war immigrant Italian domestic workers in the Toronto area. The interview I am conducting will attempt to learn about Italian immigrant women's experiences working as domestics. The research is being undertaken under the auspices of Memorial University. This study has been approved by the Women's Studies Graduate Committee and the Arts Faculty Research Committee at Memorial University. I would be most grateful if you would agree to participate.

You are free to decline to answer specific questions as well as offer opinions on issues and subjects not covered in the interview, but which you feel are relevant. I would prefer to tape record interviews so that accuracy is ensured. If you do not feel comfortable speaking in front of a tape recording device, please indicate this to me and I will record the interview by using a notebook and pen. My mother, Mrs. Renata Weisbart, will be present during this interview to act as my translator should you prefer that I conduct this interview in Italian. We will ensure that all comments given are kept in strictest confidence and that your privacy and anonymity will be protected. In no way will your real name be used in this study; an alias will be used in place of your real name.

At the conclusion of this study, information gathered from this interview will be incorporated and formatted into a Master's thesis. A copy of this thesis, upon its completion, will be available in the Queen Elizabeth II library at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Before proceeding, I ask that you sign this consent from which indicates your willingness to participate in the interview.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Bellini, Principal Researcher.

Mrs. Renata Weisbart, Translator

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I hereby consent to be interviewed for the purpose of this study subject to the conditions listed above. I fully understand the terms of this study.

Signature\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendice A

### CERTIFICATO DI CONSENSO

Mi chiamo Stephanie Bellini e sono laureata in Sociologia con la specializzazione in Studi Femminili al Memorial University, Newfoundland. Attualmente sto conducendo gli studi di ricerca sugli donne immigranti italiane-lavoratrici domestiche a Toronto nel periodo del dopoguerra. L'intervista che sto per condurre ci sarà d'aiuto nello studio sulle esperienze di donne italiane immigrate a Toronto ed impiegate come domestiche. La ricerca verrà condotta sotto l'auspicio della Memorial University ed è stata approvata dal Comitato degli Studi Femminili e dal Comitato Etico della Facoltà d'Arte al Memorial University. Le sarei immensamente grata se acconsentisse di partecipare.

Lei è libera di non rispondere alle determinate domande nonché di aggiungere opinioni sulle questioni non incluse ma che Lei ritiene rilevanti. Io preferirei registrare le mie interviste sul nastro per assicurare al testo più esattezza possibile. Se Lei non si sente a suo agio di parlare di fronte ad un registratore, La prego di farmelo sapere ed io userò solamente carta e penna. Mia madre, signora Renata Weisbart, sarà presente durante questa intervista nelle vesti del traduttore nel caso Lei preferisse che io conduca questa intervista in Italiano. La possiamo assicurare che tutti i commenti fatti rimarranno in stretta confidenza e che la sua indipendenza e l'anonimato saranno protetti. In nessun caso verrà usato il suo vero nome in questa ricerca. Al posto del suo vero nome verrà usato un soprannome.

Alla fine di questo studio, le informazioni raccolte da questa intervista verranno incorporate e formate in una tesi di specializzazione. Copie di questa tesi, una volta completata, saranno disponibili nella biblioteca Queen Elizabeth II al Memorial University, Newfoundland. Prima di procedere, Le chiedo di firmare questo documento di consenso che indicherà la sua volontà nel partecipare nell'intervista.

Stephanie Bellini. Ricercatrice.

Sig.ra Renata Weisbart. Traduttrice.

---

Io, sottoscritta, acconsento ad essere intervistata per motivi di questa ricerca a condizioni sopra descritte. Capisco pienamente lo scopo di questo studio.

Firma \_\_\_\_\_  
Data \_\_\_\_\_



## **Appendix B**

### **STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT**

Tape recording this interview will allow me to concentrate on the questions I will be asking you and your responses rather than on taking notes, thereby increasing the accuracy of my record of the interview. I would be most grateful if you would agree to allow me to interview you with a tape recording device.

The information you provide is potentially a very valuable source for other researchers wishing to do research on immigrant Italian domestic workers. For other researchers to have access to the information, some central location for storage and control is necessary. I have tentatively arranged, subject to your permission, with the Multicultural History Society of Ontario to provide storage and control of your interview tape.

With your permission, I would like to donate your interview tape to the Multicultural History Society of Ontario. If, for whatever reason, you feel that this is not an appropriate use of the interview tape, I will, at your request, either destroy the tape upon completion of my program, or you may retain the interview tape in your possession. I have not made copies of the interview tape; therefore, the tape that you will retain is the original. Would you please indicate your choice by checking the appropriate line below and signing the tape release form?

I hereby consent to be interviewed with a tape recording device fully understanding the terms of this consent form.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Sincerely,

Stephanie Bellini, Principal Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
I hereby authorize:

---Donation of tape to the Multicultural History Society of Ontario

---Destroy tape upon completion of researcher's program

---Provide me with original interview tape.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendice B

### CERTIFICATO DI CONSENSO

Il registrare questa intervista mi permetterebbe di concentrarmi sulle domande che Le farò e sulle risposte, invece che sul prendere note, aumentando così l'esattezza della documentazione dell'intervista. Le sarei molto grata se mi acconsentisse di intervistarla usando il registratore a nastro.

Le informazioni che Lei ci fornirà potrebbero essere una fonte molto preziosa per altre ricercatrici che desiderano condurre uno studio sulle donne italiane—immigranti, impiegate come domestiche. Per facilitare agli altri l'uso delle informazioni è necessario avere un posto centrale come magazzino e punto di controllo. Mi sono messa d'accordo, sempre che Lei acconsenta, con la Società Storica Multiculturale di Ontario che ci darà un posto dove custodire la cassetta con l'intervista.

Con il suo permesso, vorrei donare il nastro con la sua intervista alla soprannominata Società Storica Multiculturale di Ontario. Se, per qualunque ragione, Le ritiene che questo non sia un uso appropriato del nastro, io posso, secondo la sua richiesta, distruggere il nastro non appena finita la mia ricerca oppure Lei può decidere di tenere la cassetta con l'intervista quindi il nastro che Lei terrebbe sarebbe la copia originale. Per favore, indichi la sua scelta mettendo un segno nella adeguata versione e firmando il certificato di consenso per l'uso del nastro.

Io sottoscritta acconsento ad essere intervistata per mezzo di un registratore a nastro e capisco pienamente il senso di questo documento di consenso.

Firmato \_\_\_\_\_

Data \_\_\_\_\_

Grazie della collaborazione,

Stephanie Bellini. Ricercatrice.

---

Io sottoscritta autorizzo:

---Donazione del nastro alla Società Storica Multiculturale di Ontario

---Distruzione del nastro una volta la ricercatrice completa il suo studio

---Ritorno del nastro originale a me personalmente.

Firma \_\_\_\_\_

Data \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### \*INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### A. Personal Data

Age. Marital Status.

Year you immigrated to Canada Why did you come to Canada?

Were you single or married when you came to Canada?

What region of Italy did you come from?

Age of children the year you immigrated to Canada (if any)?

Level of education obtained.

Can you describe your family life before you immigrated to Canada?

Can you describe the community where you lived in Italy?

Can you tell me how your family life changed during World War II?

#### A. Work History

Can you tell me if you had any previous experience working as a domestic in Italy?

If so, can you describe that domestic work in Italy? Did it differ from domestic work in Canada?

If so, can you describe how it differed?

Can you tell me the main reason you chose to work as a domestic in Canada?

Tell me how you found your first housecleaning job.

Did you work in live-in or live-out service? Did you work full-time or part-time?

Can you tell me how many hours a day you worked?

Can you talk about some of your duties during your workday?

Can you describe each domestic job you held and some of the duties you performed on the job?

Did any of your duties involve caring for your employer's children?

Are you working now? Can you talk about why you stopped working?

#### B. Personal Observations

Can you talk about how you felt working as a domestic? Describe how your family felt about you working as a domestic. How do they feel talking about that part of your life?

Can you talk about the way you think other people you know might look at domestic work; is that a problem for you?

Describe for me what you liked best about working as a domestic; can you talk about what you think are the major advantages of doing paid housework for a living?

Could you talk about some of the drawbacks you found about domestic work?

Tell me how you felt about working alone.

Can you describe some of the conflicts you had with your employers? How did you resolve these conflicts?

Can you talk about the goals you had or have for your children while you were working?

\* These interview questions were taken and adapted from Glenn, E. (1986). *Issei, Nisei, War Bride: Three Generations of Japanese American Women in Domestic Service*. (See my bibliography).

## Appendice C

### INTERVISTA DOMANDE

#### A. Domanda Personale

Anni. Condizionale Matrimoniale.

L'anno di immigrazione in Canada? Perché avete immigrati in Canada?

Eri sposata ho giovane quando sei immigrati in Canada?

Da quale regione viene da l'Italia?

Hai bambini quando viene da l'Italia? E' quanti anni avevano?

Che classe hai frequentata in Italia?

Com'era la sua vita in famiglia prima di venire in Canada?

Spiegli com'era la collettività dove Lei facevi residenza?

Qual'era la società collettività della sua famiglia?

Spiegli il cambiamento della sua vita durante la seconda guerra.

#### B. Informazione D'impiego

Avevi dell'esperienza precedente come domestica in Italia?

Spiegli il lavoro domestica in Italia.

Il lavoro domestica in Canada, e differente di quella in Italia? Qual'è la differenza?

Dimmi principalmente, perché hai scelto di lavorare domestica in Canada?

Dimmi come hai trovata il suo primo lavoro come domestica.

Hai lavorato come residenze ho fuori casa? Hai lavorato ha tempo pieno ho pure parziale?

Quante ore hai lavorato durante il giorno?

Qual'erano i suoi obbligazione durante il giorno?

Se puoi, spieghar mi qual'erano altri lavori domestici che avevi e obbligazione.

L'obbligazione che avevi, implicava la cura dei bambini del suo datore di lavoro?

Dimmi perché hai smesso di lavorare.

#### C. Osservazione Personale

Puoi dirmi come si sentivi lavorando come domestica? Come pensava la sua famiglia che su lavorai come domestica? Come si sentivano quando si parlava circa della sua vita come domestica?

Dimmi che idea altre persone pensano di Lei che facevi ho che fai (del lavoro). E'un problema per Lei?

Descrivere per me quale parte migliore del lavoro Lei piace come domestica?

Cosa pensi del maggior vantaggio di fare lavor domestico per una vita? Qual'è il svantaggio che hai trovato nel lavoro domestico?

Come puoi descrivere il conflitto che avevi con il suo principale (se avevi)?

Qual'era la meta che avevi (ho hai) per suoi figli durante il suo lavoro?

**Table 1: Participant Demographics**

<b>Level of Education Obtained in Italy</b>	<b>Location by Region and Date of Italian Birth</b>	<b>Year Participant Immigrated to Canada</b>
Grade 5 (Mrs. I)	Born in 1921 in Tuscany(North-Central Italy)	1953 at 32 years of age
Grade 5 (Mrs. D)	Born in 1922 in Veneto(Northern Italy)	1955 at 33 years of age
Grade 5 (Mrs. K)	Born in 1924 in Veneto(Northern Italy)	1952 at 28 years of age
Grade 5 (Mrs. G)	Born in 1926 in Liguria	1952 at 26 years of age
Grade 5 (Mrs. V)	Born in 1930 in Marche(Central Italy)	1954 at 24 years of age
Grade 8 (Mrs. I)	Born in 1938 in Marche(Central Italy)	1958 at 20 years of age
Grade 5 (Mrs. Q)	Born in 1939 in Veneto(Northern Italy)	1961 at 22 years of age
Grade 3 (Mrs. U)	Born in 1939 in Abruzzi(South-central Italy)	1960 at 21 years of age

Grade 3 (Mrs. H)	Born in 1941 in Abruzzi(South-central Italy)	1961 at 20 years of age
Grade 6 (Mrs. J)	Born in 1944 in Veneto(Northern Italy)	1960 at 16 years of age
Grade 5 (Mrs. Z)	Born in 1946 in Friuli(Northern Italy)	1965 at 19 years of age
Grade 5 (Mrs. L)	Born in 1947 in Abruzzi(South-central Italy)	1966 at 19 years of age
Grade 5 (Mrs. P)	Born in 1952 in Lazio(Central Italy)	1973 at 22 years of age



Map 1 Italy

(Source: Iacovetta, F. (1992). Such Hardworking People.  
Mc-Gill-Queen's Univ. Press: Montreal.)





